

Keynote - New Jersey Sustainability Summit
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Good morning everyone. This is our favorite day of the year because we get to see all of you. Please join me in giving a warm thank you to all of the Sustainable Jersey staff who work so hard all year to support you. Ask them to stand.

- Thank underwriters and sponsors. Underwriters, platinum and gold.

I think most people know what we do, but real quick, for or those of you who may not know what we do:

Sustainable Jersey is a certification program that provides guidance to municipalities and schools to address our most pressing problems. It's a provider of resources, training, and technical assistance.

Discuss statewide summary stats:

Municipalities

Schools

Actions implemented

Participating communities are in all parts of the state, and all demographics. 91% of the people in New Jersey live in a Sustainable Jersey community. Republican and Democrat, urban, suburban, rural. North south central.

But more than any stat or the certification, Sustainable Jersey is a movement of people in every corner of New Jersey working voluntarily and collaboratively to speed our progress toward a sustainable future.

There are hundreds of Sustainable Jersey Green teams, representing tens of thousands of people **voluntarily** trying to do the right thing. Not because of a law or regulation. Not because they have to. Because they feel morally compelled to give their precious time and energy to building something bigger than themselves. To building our future.

Collectively, we are a new breed of nimble collaborative government trying to rise to the challenges of our modern world. An entirely new layer of earnest, citizen driven self organized government. The people in this room are, to me, the embodiment of democracy in it's purest form.

Like many people I've been thinking a lot about democracy lately as it comes under threat.

I've thought back to similar great crises in our history. I have found myself thinking a lot about Abraham Lincoln.

Lincoln understood something profound about periods of national fracture.

He understood that democracies fail when citizens lose the ability to trust one another, govern themselves, and sustain a shared sense of responsibility for the future. He saw the civil war as a moral struggle over slavery and fundamental definitions of what it means to be human. But he also saw it as a battle for the soul of citizen directed government. He said the war was so "that this nation shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Is it grandiose to compare this moment, and our role in it, to the great moments of history? It's not.

I think many Americans sense today that something fundamental is becoming unstable.

Not just politically.

Not just environmentally.

But socially, morally, institutionally.

The pillars of the old order are crumbling.

And I do not believe we should comfort ourselves with the assumption that everything is eventually going to return to the way it was.

Because in many ways, the way it was is what brought us here.

For decades we built systems optimized for speed, extraction, convenience, consumption, and concentration of power.

We hollowed out local capacity.

We weakened civic institutions.

We increasingly treated citizens as consumers.

We allowed enormous concentrations of wealth and influence to emerge far from the daily lives of ordinary people.

We built information systems that monetize outrage more effectively than understanding.

And we detached ourselves — from place, from one another, and sometimes from our own deepest values.

Now many of those systems are foundering at the same time.

Climate instability.

Institutional distrust.

Housing insecurity.

Political fragmentation.

Economic anxiety.

Loneliness.

Information ecosystems that reward fear and tribalism.

And a growing sense among many people that decisions shaping their lives are being made by forces they neither trust nor control.

People feel this across the political spectrum.

And I think we make a profound mistake when we refuse to acknowledge that reality.

I suspect we have more in common with many of the people we imagine ourselves opposing than we are comfortable admitting. For many in the MAGA movement, the animating force was a belief that the system was not listening, not responding, and not accountable. So they reached for disruption. And on that narrow point, they weren't wrong: Americans across the political spectrum are increasingly disconnected from meaningful influence over the systems shaping their lives.

And we don't solve our political crisis unless we change that underlying condition in our system.

Now that does not mean every response to that frustration is wise or moral. It does not mean anger always leads to constructive outcomes. In fact we know anger is easily directed toward racial, ethnic and religious antagonism. To tribalism. But it does mean that rebuilding democratic culture requires more than condemning one another from a distance.

Lincoln understood this.

In his Second Inaugural Address, during the final days of the Civil War, he reflected with extraordinary humility on the national crisis unfolding around him. He said:

“Both (sides) read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other.”

“The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully.”

Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bond-man’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

He is saying that the war is a punishment from God to both sides. And that it won’t end until the collective debt is paid in full.

This is not moral relativism. Lincoln was **not** morally indifferent.

But it is humility.

It’s the recognition that societies can become collectively distorted.

That no side emerges entirely pure.

That self-righteousness alone cannot heal a fractured nation.

And humility feels increasingly rare in our public life today. I can’t imagine a politician making such biting, humble, and powerful statements today.

Our culture rewards bravado and certainty.

Humiliation of our opponents.

Tribal loyalty.

Moral over-simplification.

But democracies cannot survive indefinitely when citizens lose the capacity to see one another as fellow human beings sharing a common fate.

And this is where I believe the work all of you do becomes so important.

Because one of the things I value most about this movement is that it remains one of the few places where people still have to work together in the real world.

Not as avatars.

Not as algorithms.

Not as curated online identities.

But face to face

As neighbors.

Teachers.

Municipal staff.

Volunteers.

Engineers.

Business owners.

Students.

Faith leaders.

Elected officials.

People trying to solve actual problems in actual communities.

Lincoln described democracy as government of the people, by the people, for the people.

But democracy in that sense is not self-sustaining.

It depends upon habits of cooperation.

Shared sacrifice.

Stewardship.

Trust.

The willingness to accept responsibility for places and people beyond ourselves.

And in many ways, that is what sustainability work really is.

Not simply emissions accounting.

Not merely technocratic management.

Not ideological branding.

But communities taking responsibility for the long-term conditions that make human flourishing possible.

Energy.
Water.
Food systems.
Public health.
Education.
Public space.
Climate resilience.
Social cohesion.
Democratic participation.

This is fundamentally civic work.

And resilience itself is ultimately human and relational.

Not just infrastructure.
Not just technology.
Not just policy.

Resilience depends on whether people trust one another enough to act collectively under stress.

The people that make up this movement and are in this room are the people I trust.

Not because we all agree on everything.
Not because anyone here possesses moral purity.
And certainly not because any political faction has a monopoly on wisdom or righteousness.

But because this community continues showing up to do difficult work together.

You have learned how to collaborate across differences because reality demands it.

Flooding is real.
Energy costs are real.
Heat is real.
Aging infrastructure is real.
Economic stress is real.
Isolation is real.

Reality checks ideology.

And our work must continue adapting to reality as conditions change.

Take our Digital Schools Star program.

When that program began, the central challenge was technological access. We wanted to help schools adopt technology and ensure students and families were not excluded from the digital transition.

And that was the right mission for that moment.

But the moment changed.

Now we face far more complicated questions.

Screen addiction and predatory algorithms.

Information bubbles.

Declining attention spans.

The movement of core educational experiences onto screens and the resulting decline in student development.

Concerns about cognitive development, mental health, civic literacy, and democratic culture itself.

The question is no longer simply whether students have access to technology.

The question is whether young people will possess the civic, intellectual, and human capacities necessary to remain free citizens in a technological society increasingly shaped by systems designed to capture attention rather than cultivate wisdom.

So the work evolves.

Now we are asking how we help teachers, parents, and school districts navigate what citizenship means in this new era, and how to exert democratic will to bring technology to heel in service of civil society, instead of co-opting it.

We have a panel later today that will grapple with these very questions.

This is responding honestly to the moment when the world changes.

We see the same thing in energy.

Right now, families and businesses across New Jersey are struggling with rising electricity costs. And this is not isolated to New Jersey. Across much of the Northeast and increasingly across the country, electricity demand is rising faster than systems are adapting.

Data centers play a role.

Electrification plays a role.

Modern life itself consumes more energy than ever before - we all share responsibility.

But regardless of the cause, people experience this very concretely:

higher bills,

greater economic anxiety,

and growing uncertainty about whether essential systems remain stable and affordable.

And this is where local sustainability work becomes deeply practical.

Energy efficiency is not just climate policy.

It is household resilience.

Economic resilience.

Grid resilience.

Every retrofit, every municipal efficiency project, community solar initiative reduces pressure on the system and helps create breathing room for families and businesses.

And when communities help solve real problems, something larger happens.

They build trust.

They build credibility.

They build civic capacity.

People become more willing to act collectively when they can see evidence that collective action still works.

And I think that may be one of the deepest lessons of this moment.

The path out of paralysis is not rhetorical.

Shared problem-solving rebuilds the social foundations that democracy depends upon.

And it is practical.

When I talk about practical solutions, problem solving, and nimble governance, let me paint a picture for you of what that looks like. It turns out that for many local governments the bottle neck preventing them from doing energy efficiency upgrades on their buildings was the difficulty in gathering and organizing their utility bills. To take advantage of the State programs that pay for efficiency upgrades you have to have a year of utility bills, and you have to match each bill to each building, and the meter on that building.

It's not particularly hard, but it's one more annoying thing to do. It's number 168 on the business administrator's prioritized list of things to do. And this one annoying task was preventing hundreds of local governments from taking practical steps to lower their bills, save tax dollars, and prevent climate change.

The State and utilities offerer the incentives, but fixing this one bottleneck was not anyone's job specifically.

When we founded SJ we weren't thinking that our grand vision for the future was riffling through dusty file cabinets and typing bills into a spread sheet. It's not glorious. But if that's the bottle neck, then that's what we need to do. It's not glorious... but it is glorious...because it's the work that's going to make the difference.

But we also cannot forget the moral roots of what we are doing.

Because ultimately this is not just a technocratic exercise.

We are fighting for the future of our communities.

For the character of our society.

For our children.

And for whether democratic self-government remains viable in an age of impersonal fragmentation, manipulation, and instability.

Near the end of the Civil War, Lincoln concluded his Second Inaugural Address with words that still resonate today:

“With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right...”

Notice the balance there.

Firmness.

But also charity, and humility.

Conviction.

But also mercy.

Not surrendering moral responsibility.

But refusing to abandon our shared humanity

And then Lincoln turns toward reconstruction:

“To bind up the nation’s wounds...”

I increasingly believe that much of the work before us now is a form of civic reconstruction.

I’m not entirely sad to say the old order is mortally wounded.

The civic reconstruction is rebuilding our human infrastructure. Starting at the local level.... Where it still works, through trust, stewardship, resilience, and democratic culture that can still thrive in a society entering a period of profound transition.

And despite everything, I remain hopeful.

Not because progress is inevitable.

History does not work that way. There is every reason to fear this could go badly for us, for our children and grandchildren.

I’m hopeful because I have seen what happens when communities rediscover their ability to solve problems together.

A rain garden is not just a rain garden. A solar panel is more than a solar panel.

Success changes psychology.

It changes what people believe is possible.

It changes whether they see one another as adversaries or collaborators.

And when enough communities begin rebuilding trust and stewardship at the local level, something larger becomes possible again.

Not a return to the past.

But the emergence of something wiser, more resilient, more grounded, and perhaps more humane than what came before.