Small can be strong

By JEREMY BRECHER

As Connecticut's economy stagnates, proposals proliferate for casinos, sports arenas, malls, fantasy theme parks, giveaways to lure out-of-state companies and contracts for just one more militarily-useless weapons system. The Land of Steady Habits is in danger of becoming the land of the quick fix.

The new global economy pushes us toward the kind of short-term, this quarter's bottom-line thinking that is depleting the economy and destroying the environment.

If we are going to create a decent way of life for ourselves on this stony bit of hill and coastland, we need to devote our resources to environmentally and socially sustainable development. To do that, we need a long-range planning process that takes stock of our resources and applies them to what we and the world will need in the future.

Perhaps we can draw inspiration from an economic crisis in the past. Two hundred years ago, Connecticut's farms were depleted and failing. Industry was stagnating. Hard-hit families were leaving for Vermont, New York and Ohio. As a result, 45 Connecticut towns were smaller in 1820 than they had been in 1790 or 1800.

A few of those who stayed pioneered a new economic model. They took the handicraft techniques that had been used for generations in New England homes and began producing buttons, pots and other Yankee notions for their neighbors in nearby towns. What their neighbors needed turned out to be what the United States needed — and, ultimately, what the world needed.

This expanding market encouraged them to develop their productive capability. Connecticut helped pioneer an industrial revolution, in which handicraft techniques were mechanized to produce more quickly and cheaply. It also made a social revolution.

For example, Puritan concepts of property ownership, based on the primacy of the common good, were replaced by forms of individual ownership that rewarded personal gain. This individualism was soon further

Jeremy Brecher of West Cornwall is co-author of "Brass Valley: The Story of Working People's Lives and Struggles in an American Industrial Region" and co-editor of "Global Vision: Beyond a New World Order."
State can adapt and create a new economic future

The world needs small-scale, adaptable technologies that minimize resource use and don’t harm the environment. If Connecticut can make them, it will have a viable and honorable role in the global economy. (The Environmental Research Institute at the University of Connecticut, the development of a few “green tech” industries in the state and the opening of a coming state Entrepreneurial Center are steps in the right direction.)

Connecticut has the capacity to become a model of transition to small-scale, environmentally sound manufacturing.

Connecticut has problems — many of them rooted in its past successes — that are making its established way of life unsustainable. For generations, it has abused its land, air and water, creating an unsustainable environment. Its unplanned economic and social development have generated urban decay, suburban sprawl and rural degradation. It has allowed its material and social infrastructure to deteriorate. It has permitted racial and class injustice to fester, creating a growing gap between the two Connecticuts of the affluent and the poor. It has increased dependence on military production, speculative finance and other activities that may produce a quick buck but divert resources from providing the goods and services people need.

People all over the world confront similar problems: environmental degradation, poverty, injustices, military dependence and inadequate investment and planning for the future. If we begin using Connecticut’s mix of resources to address these problems, we will begin contributing to a new model of economic and social development that could find applications all over the world. For example: Connecticut has the capacity to become a model of transition to small-scale, environmentally sound manufacturing. After all, it retains one of the most diverse manufacturing bases in the world. Except for a handful of military behemoths, its manufacturers are relatively small-scale, highly productive companies that combine scientific knowledge and skilled labor to create an enormous range of products.

modified by Connecticut’s incorporation laws, which encouraged holders of capital to make their funds available to struggling young entrepreneurs.

Connecticut was transformed from a rural state to an urban state. And a growing immigrant work force turned an ethnically and religiously homogeneous culture into one of extraordinary diversity.

This new economic and social model made Connecticut for a time the richest state in the richest country in the world. But as Connecticut experiences devastating economic decline in the new global economy, we can still find relevance in the idea of utilizing existing resources to meet local needs that are also global needs.

Connecticut has the capacity to become a model of transition to small-scale, environmentally sound manufacturing.

Connecticut has the capacity to become a model of transition to small-scale, environmentally sound manufacturing.

Connecticut has problems — many of them rooted in its past successes — that are making its established way of life unsustainable. For generations, it has abused its land, air and water, creating an unsustainable environment. Its unplanned economic and social development have generated urban decay, suburban sprawl and rural degradation. It has allowed its material and social infrastructure to deteriorate. It has permitted racial and class injustice to fester, creating a growing gap between the two Connecticuts of the affluent and the poor. It has increased dependence on military production, speculative finance and other activities that may produce a quick buck but divert resources from providing the goods and services people need.

People all over the world confront similar problems: environmental degradation, poverty, injustices, military dependence and inadequate investment and planning for the future. If we begin using Connecticut’s mix of resources to address these problems, we will begin contributing to a new model of economic and social development that could find applications all over the world. For example: Connecticut has the capacity to become a model of transition to small-scale, environmentally sound manufacturing. After all, it retains one of the most diverse manufacturing bases in the world. Except for a handful of military behemoths, its manufacturers are relatively small-scale, highly productive companies that combine scientific knowledge and skilled labor to create an enormous range of products.

The world needs small-scale, adaptable technologies that minimize resource use and don’t harm the environment. If Connecticut can make them, it will have a viable and honorable role in the global economy. (The Environmental Research Institute at the University of Connecticut, the development of a few “green tech” industries in the state and the opening of a coming state Entrepreneurial Center are steps in the right direction.)

Connecticut has developed as a network of small cities. This could be a highly productive — and pleasant — setup. But because of terrible transportation and land-use planning, the state’s human geography has become a social and environmental disaster.

There’s nothing utopian about creating a viable, economically and environmentally sound public transportation system. A hundred years ago, Connecticut had a trolley system that provided cheap and quick transport to every corner of the state. Rebuilding such a system and using it to reshape the links between urban, suburban and rural areas would provide an enormous number of jobs — and develop economic capacities that would be useful all over the world.

We should be careful not to limit our definition of resources and needs to what is conventionally considered economic. For example, people from all over the world who speak many languages live in Connecticut. Multilingual capacity is a necessity in the new global economy, and its absence is a major economic weakness of the United States. We should create opportunities in our cities for people to hear and learn languages through-out daily life and to immerse themselves in languages they wish to learn. We should use our multilingual population as language tutors in schools and institutions where people want to learn languages.

No doubt a new Connecticut economy will require institutional changes. In some cases, government will need to become a long-term investor in research, development and production activities that address problems in ways that produce elements of the new model. In other cases, we will need new forms of community self-help, ranging from co-operatives to municipal or employee ownership of enterprises, from credit unions to organized bartering of labor and services. And we will need to develop strong incentives to channel social activity toward sustainable development.

Each effort will require resources. But we are already squandering resources on far less promising efforts. Every week, we hear of new proposals to spend public money on unnecessary weapons production, shopping centers, athletic extravaganzas and gambling. Wouldn’t we do better to build on existing capacities to meet the needs of our own people and communities — and of the world? If Connecticut lives by the sword, the mall, the sports palace and the casino, it risks perishing by them. If it helps build the world a sustainable future, it will — to paraphrase the state motto — be sustained.