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Q&A: Anthony Sblendorio, Ecological Group & Back to Nature Posted By Susan Piperato

As the founder of the award-winning New Jersey-based landscape architects firm Back to Nature, LEED AP Anthony Sblendorio is not only completed the first LEED Gold project in the Northeast, but has become a leader in "regenerative development" with his new development firm, Ecological Group. We spoke to him about what regenerative development entails, and what his new firm-co-founded with former New York Gov. George Pataki and Joseph Grano, CEO of Centurion Holdings, LLC-hopes to achieve in this up-and-coming field.



You made your mark in New Jersey as an ecofriendly landscape architect, and now your new enterprise, Ecological Group, is making its mark by moving beyond green building and design toward what's known in Europe as regenerative development-yet that term still seems unfamiliar to many people in the American green building industry. Tell us what regenerative development is.

Like most emerging design philosophies, regenerative development has different meanings to different stakeholders. We at Ecological feel that it best describes a holistic process and design aspiration. In order to have a group of stakeholders rally around the environment, they must first share a common goal of what it means to be regenerative - to enhance and improve living systems through development. The best way to develop that common goal is by having all stakeholders be fully engaged in a "story of place." This process informs the stakeholders how they can contribute their expertise to regenerate. For example, let's discuss a site that has poorly drained soils. It's imperative to make sure the design team incorporates new constructed wetlands to increase groundwater recharge, increase biodiversity, and improve soil health. The engineer, architect, ecologist, landscape architect, and even attorneys (writing deed restrictions) can all aspire to a higher level of design. More recently, we have been focused on how projects can regenerate local food systems and sustainable education. In this example, if that constructed wetland can be integrated into the curriculum of a local school, that's a really powerful thing.

How did Ecological Group come together, and what do the three principals-former New York Governor George Pataki; Joseph Grano, CEO of Centurion Holdings, LLC; and you, as the head of Back to Nature landscape architects-bring to the company?

I became friends with Joe when he hired my company, Back to Nature, to be the land planner for his beautiful home. Joe and I would discuss how the green/environmental movement was finally gaining momentum, but there was a gap in the marketplace as no one had truly defined what green really is, or what it should be. Then Joe brought in Gov. Pataki and we started talking about what was happening in real estate, finance, and sustainability. We realized that those three sectors were not effectively working together, and that there is an interesting opportunity to move beyond LEED certification, providing new services to commercial building owners, looking at the world of development and land development, and implementing a regenerative approach, which requires a more creative way of financing and requires a new way of looking at regulation and approval processes. That's why the partnership made so much sense.

Gov. Pataki is a leader in sustainability-he created the first tax incentive for green building in the country and his work at Battery Park City was revolutionary, becoming the first green residential high-rise. Joe, having run one of the largest financial institutions in the world, has a great understanding of developing businesses. I was a leader in regenerative development, with some of New Jersey's first green projects.

What sorts of regenerative development projects are you working on now, and what's in the pipeline?

We have a number of projects that are at varying stages. One of our most interesting projects is Mine Brook Road, a development that we're doing in Basking Ridge with the Hampshire Real Estate Companies. Basking Ridge is a beautiful town in northern New Jersey, one of the nicest towns in all of New Jersey, with an excellent school system. Mine Brook Road will be the first true model of the eco/agro developments that we strive to do. It is essentially an eco village of 12 green, energy-efficient homes with a unique communal feel. There will be two barns and a pond that are shared by all the residents, there will be local organic food generation, and we will also embed an educational program to teach the residents and their children about all of the green/regenerative components in the community. The project is the perfect model for our regenerative concept.

What do you see as the future of development?

Development will be truly regenerative. The perception of real estate development will move beyond the consumption of land and natural resources and a burden on our communities' systems (such as schools, roads, social services). It must. We must start to view real estate as part of the solution that enhances these systems. Therefore, we must ask how a "development" can help develop people and community. How can a development improve soil health, improve local food systems, improve biodiversity, advance the richness of our education system, educate our neighbors, and be a model to inspire others? The future of the development will be eco/agro small community based solutions!

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