

Lecture Report:

## People-Powered Changes in Salt Lake City

MND Auditorium  
21 November 2016



As an urban planner, Dr Ralph Becker cuts a slightly different figure as a US city mayor. Serving two terms as Mayor of Salt Lake City, Utah (2008–2016), Dr Becker and his team brought about a much-acclaimed transformation to the city’s liveability.

Solar energy was identified as the most achievable and easiest energy source, given Utah’s weather.



“The easiest thing to do is to start with your government entities,” Dr Becker said. “So we converted all our fleets. We went away from 2-cycle engine to even small things like leaf-blowers and lawn-cutting. And all our garbage trucks we switched to renewable energy sources.... It is fortunately an incredibly fast-growing business.”

From 2008 to 2016, recycling increased 60% alongside the new pay-as-you-throw system. The city has set a zero-waste target for 2040, and has reduced waste by 50% as of 2015. Salt Lake City is also operating a bike-share system, launched with 70% private funding five years ago.



“It turns out that for us — in a society or community like Salt Lake and in Utah, that the way that we get to our best decisions and gave the best results is through a collaborative process.

“There is great exposure, I can tell you, to politicians and also to planners and others, when you open up your whole process to public scrutiny, public comment and public review — and all of the media attention that can come with those controversies.

“There’s a great wisdom in the hundreds of thousands of people that may get involved in the process, depending on its size and scope.

“People think that when they start this process, they know what the end result is going to be. I have never seen that happen, when you do a decent job of involving the public.



“As difficult and painful as it is sometimes when you’re going through the process, we always come up with far superior results and solutions.”

On the conflicting demands between citizens concerned with immediate horizons and the longer-term view of professionals, Dr Becker gave an analogy from white-water kayaking.



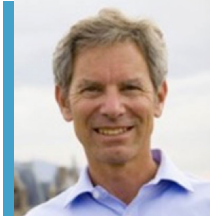
“This is a question of how leadership works in a democracy.... Think about how far you push things that are believed strongly and in the best interest of the people, but not within their sight.

“In kayaking, one tries to find a course that’s comfortable — sometimes on a big wave, trying to find a sweet spot where you get ahead on the wave but not too far ahead, and enough to move fast.

“I think of politics and leadership in kind of the same way. Trying to find that spot where you’re on the front edge, is the key to helping the community and people move forward. But if you get too far ahead, people get angry and they don’t understand the change, and they get rid of you.”

# About the Speakers

*Speaker:*



*Dr Ralph BECKER*

Fellow, American Institute of Certified Planners  
Former Mayor, Salt Lake City  
Past President, National League of Cities

Dr Ralph Becker was Mayor of Salt Lake City from 2008-2016, during which time he brought about a much-acclaimed liveability transformation of the city. He had also been elected for six terms to the State of Utah Legislature. He was President of the National League of Cities, an organisation representing US municipalities, from 2008-2015. He is a lawyer and an urban planner and a partner in a planning, environmental assessment, conflict resolution and policy analysis consulting firm in Salt Lake City.

*Moderator:*



*ONG See Hai*

Honorary Secretary, Singapore Institute of Planners

Ong See Hai is the Honorary Secretary of the Singapore Institute of Planners, an institute representing urban planners and allied professionals committed to the betterment of communities through good urban planning and development practices. See Hai has thirty years of urban planning and municipal consulting work experience in Singapore, South-East Asia, China, Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America.

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## *About CLC*

The Centre for Liveable Cities was set up in 2008 by the Ministry of National Development and the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, based on a strategic blueprint developed by Singapore's Inter-Ministerial Committee on Sustainable Development. Guided by its mission to distil, create and share knowledge on liveable and sustainable cities, the Centre's work spans three main areas - Research, Capability Development, and Knowledge Platforms. The CLC Lecture Series is a platform for urban experts to share their knowledge with other practitioners. For more information, please visit: <http://www.clc.gov.sg>