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**Leapfrogging: A Perspective by Jeffrey L. Zucker, LEED-AP AIA**

While standing in front of the audience at the Navajo Housing Authority’s Green Building Conference, I realized that my nametag was inappropriately labeled “Speaker”. In truth, I had arrived with an expectation to be more of a listener than a speaker. As a result, I had come to the conference prepared to facilitate a conversation, rather than make a presentation. Staring into the room full of expectant faces, without a specific agenda, or a nifty little power point presentation safely tucked into my back pocket was a bit daunting, to say the least.

The topic of my session was billed as “Leapfrogging into the Future”. The concept of Leapfrogging, in the context of sustainability, is defined by Wikipedia as a theory of design which suggests that development may be accelerated by skipping inferior, less efficient, more expensive or more polluting technologies and industries by moving directly to more advanced ones. It is proposed that through leapfrogging, the people of the Navajo Nation could avoid environmentally harmful stages of development by “leaping over” the polluting development trajectories of industrialized countries. The adoption of solar energy technologies is an example of an opportunity to avoid the mistakes of highly industrialized countries in creating an energy infrastructure based upon fossil fuels, by jumping directly into the Solar Age.

The Navajo Nation however, is faced with a dilemma when considering the leapfrogging concept. For example, photovoltaic panels would seem to be an obvious way to provide electric power to homes that are not connected to the electric grid, as illustrated in the article written by Daniel Kraker in the High Country News. However, as the article points out, the extremely remote nature of many of the homes in the Navajo Nation makes it very difficult for technical assistance to be provided in a timely manner, should there be any problems with the system. Therefore, leapfrogging over a home tied to the electric grid into a more environmentally friendly alternative may not be the most viable solution in this instance.

Similarly, a water harvesting system would appear to be a natural choice when faced with unreliable wells and no access to municipal water supplies. However, given the sporadic nature of precipitation on the Navajo lands, water harvesting is just not that attractive a solution to the problem. As Lean Fowler, the Coconino County Supervisor from District 5 noted during the discussion, it is much easier to



talk about water harvesting as a viable alternative when you can just turn on your tap water in times of drought.

It turns out that the former President of the Navajo Nation, Peterson Zah, was also in the audience that day. He pointed out that “leapfrogging” could go in more than one direction. The traditional values of the ancestors have much to teach us about living lightly upon the Earth. While nobody is advocating that we all return to living in caves, perhaps the best approach would be a middle ground, where the materials that Nature has to offer us are combined with the best practices that humankind can devise. In other words, the leap “back to the future” may take us on a path “forward to the past.”

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jeffrey L. Zucker". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Jeffrey L. Zucker, LEED-AP AIA