

Planning News – Commentary

**Jeff Merz, AICP-LEED AP
E-Blast Newsletter Editor and Planner with AECOM**

Edifice Complex

Last year, I attended an environmental conference in Saipan. One of the main speakers worked at the new facility of the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) in suburban Denver. A large graphic of the headquarters building was proudly displayed behind the speaker. What struck me was why an agency committed to renewability, reuse, reduced footprint and alternative energy would locate itself on a vacant 'greenfield' parcel on the urban fringe of a metropolitan area, accessible primarily (or possibly only) by car, requiring extension of new utilities, communication lines, roadways, storm drainage and grading/paving for parking and building pads. Granted this is a laboratory, so it is possible that a large amount of open space is needed for wind turbines, solar arrays and other land-intensive uses so that experiments can be performed and analyzed conveniently near the research offices. And it is my understanding that NREL does supply its own energy via the alternative mechanisms located on their site. But, I can identify countless former industrial brownfield sites meeting the acreage criteria for NREL, from Seattle to Philadelphia to Atlanta, all crying out for this type of redevelopment. Of course, we do want to attract the best and brightest to this type of forward-thinking and much-respected agency, and this attraction is partly achieved through the provision of nice amenities and surroundings. Looking from your desk out over a post-urban Detroit past a former Packard assembly plant site is, arguably, not the same as a view of the Rockies and verdant grasslands a half-hour from the ski slopes. But, could this federal agency not find some middle ground location on an urban in-fill site, close to transit, in a reasonably scenic and desirable area?

NREL Complex in Golden, CO



HAWAII PLANNING



American Planning Association
Hawaii Chapter
Making Great Communities Happen

A Publication of the Hawaii Chapter of the American Planning Association

Birkenstocks R Us

I remember years ago when I lived in San Francisco, I would drive through crunchy, eco-friendly Marin County on my way up the coast. Right off the freeway and outside the immediate sphere of urban San Francisco, sat the regional headquarters for the Birkenstock sandal company. The only way to get there was by car. The parcel had been partially cleared of vegetation and trees to make way for the building and parking lot, and there was cut/fill work done to flatten the hilly site. Why had the ecologically-aware Birkenstock Company (of all companies!) not considered locating in the Mission Bay area of San Francisco, downtown Oakland or even the warehouse district of Berkeley across the bay? Certainly these areas are edgier and grittier than manicured Marin but far from being urban wastelands, all these areas are now up and coming and increasingly desirable. Locating in any of these areas would have allowed employees to walk (in comfortable Birkenstock products no less), bike or take the subway/light rail/ferry to work, support local lunch places and services in these distressed areas, and hook into existing (and underutilized) urban infrastructure. I will only assume that Birkenstock built at its Marin County redwood tree and fauna-laden location to demonstrate its “oneness with nature”. But, what better way to demonstrate a love of nature than to NOT develop greenfields, donate into a land trust whose mission is land preservation (if so inclined), and instead, build within an existing urban infill area, close to transit, services, existing infrastructure and residences?



Bucolic Marin County with the Golden Gate Bridge