

Planning News – Opinion-Editorial 2012 - A Year of Magical Thinking

**Jeff Merz, AICP-LEED AP
E-Blast Newsletter Editor**

"Don't let misinformation or falsehoods stand for even five seconds... Do not be afraid to be ruthless in your corrections." - Andrés Duany

Out of Obscurity

The above quote from esteemed urbanist Mr. Duany was stated in the context of his advice for managing charrettes. But his text is applicable in a different circumstance, for a more pressing matter – the increasingly irrational attack on planning and planners.

In one sense we planners should be flattered. As recently as fifteen years ago when you mentioned to someone you were an urban or city planner, you were met with a quizzical look warranting an explanation of what, exactly, a planner does. Times have changed and now just like the politicization of everything from science, religion, the environment, news media and culture, planning and planners (and our purported diabolical schemes) are now seen by some individuals and organizations as a threat to their very existence. Planning, with all its associated subgenres, is now a frequent and animated topic of political/partisan bickering.

Agenda 21 Bully Pulpit

Agenda 21 is a document adopted at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro. The document reflects a broad international consensus that worsening poverty and growing stresses on the environment require greater integration between environmental and development concerns. Agenda 21 is not a treaty and is not legally binding. Rather, Agenda 21 sets out a general blueprint, or, in the words of Tariq Banuri, Director of the UN's Division for Sustainable Development, "a common vision" for environmentally-sustainable growth. Agenda 21 was signed by President George H.W. Bush. Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama have all endorsed the compact.

Agenda 21 opponents have said that the program, among other things, would seize private land and force Americans to live in cities. Over the past year legislators in Kansas, Oklahoma, New Hampshire and Georgia to name a few, have introduced legislation to ban implementation of Agenda 21 recommendations in their respective states.

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"It sounds a little on the weird side, but we've found we ignore it at our own peril." - George Homewood, Vice President APA – Virginia Chapter, discussing the Agenda 21 Conspiracy Theorists

Recently and with greater frequency, the public planning decision-making realm and public hearings have been appropriated across the country by a certain type of group. Built on a foundation of UN 'Agenda 21' paranoia, armed with their Ayn Rand paperbacks and fueled by opposition to *All Things Government*, angry anti-planning mobs now show up at planning commission hearings and municipal meetings across the country to ensure these meetings devolve into angry, personal, ideological rant-fests sometimes resulting in violence or threats of violence requiring police intervention. Nor are these modern groups of protesters your garden-variety NIMBYs.



Planning Commission Meeting in Virginia

"Even with no evidence to back up their story, activists see an Agenda 21 conspiracy everywhere they look:

- *In Santa Rosa, CA, Agenda 21 protestors shouted down speakers at a Metropolitan Planning Commission meeting to get public feedback on a regional plan to improve transportation. Police were called.*
- *In Missoula, MT, police were also called to keep order at a city council meeting to discuss membership renewal in the organization, ICLEI–Local Governments for Sustainability USA. (The council voted to renew.)*
- *In Norfolk, VA, activists protested a regional plan to protect economic assets and natural habitats from sea-level rise due to a changing climate.*
- *In Rutherford County, TN, a local zoning resolution was protested as a UN plot to take away private property. The list goes on".*

AGENDA 21
IS EVIL

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Far from being the modern-day equivalent of Jane Jacobs-esque battles with Robert Moses, these rallies have nothing to do with actual planning issues. Attendees aren't interested in finding planning solutions, working towards compromise within a democratic process or hearing opposing opinions. Their tactics are frequently designed to instill public fear, silence discourse, create inertia in the public realm and identify any and all planning efforts (or even the mere mention of such) as some inherent evil.

As described in a recent *Atlantic Cities* website piece:

"...this type of fearful rhetoric helps create a perceived enemy to rally against. If all of these urban planning and environmental regulations are part of a nefarious plot for world domination, then anything is up for grabs. Any insignificant recommendation about traffic circles to avoid congestion, smart meters for monitoring energy usage, or tracking greenhouse gas emissions becomes suspect".

This isn't how public hearings and the planning process should play out. No community benefits when discussion is stifled, threats are made, agenda items ignored and decisions deferred.

Think Tanks

Think tanks such as *Heritage Foundation*, *Heartland Institute*, *Cato Institute*, *John Birch Society* (yes, they are still around), and *American Enterprise Institute* provide talking points for this crowd by consistently publishing seriously flawed and sometimes intentionally misleading anti-planning papers including many fueling Agenda 21 conspiracy theories.

If there was any doubt as to the anti-planning bias within some of these types of organizations, consider the following: While researching for this current article I called the Cato Institute offices in D.C to get copies of some of their planning-related studies. I was excitedly informed of the numerous anti-planning efforts and studies completed by their organization and for additional information I was instructed to contact a Cato writer who goes by the blog moniker of "The Anti-Planner". Seriously? "The Anti-Planner?" See: <http://ti.org/antiplanner/>



A John Birch Society "Rally" of 3

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Do a web search or access any of these organizations' websites and you come across scholarly gems such as these:

- *Planning Makes World Housing Unaffordable*
- *Roundabouts and Decline of Civilization* (huh?)
- *How Urban Planners Caused the Housing Bubble*
- *More on Why Long Range Planning Fails*
- *Let Forest Planning Wither Away*

And my personal favorite –

- *Ceausescu: Father of Smart Growth*

Let me be clear; the problem isn't that these organizations and their reports are anti-planning/anti-planner. I am in no way implying that those who disagree with planning efforts, or those who oppose planning, planning projects or even planners, have no right to voice their opinions. Planners themselves frequently, passionately (and appropriately) have diverging opinions from their colleagues, the public and elected officials on a full range of planning issues and policies. Opposing opinions and animated discourse keep professions and professionals sharp and honest. As with all professions, a 'groupthink' echo chamber benefits no one or any community. The issue arises when these groups consistently offer up misleading, misinformed and outright false information such as this Agenda 21 nonsense.

"Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts" –Attributed to Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan

So, it is time for a long overdue Edward R. Murrow-style call out on these misleading attacks on planning and planners in general and this Agenda 21 conspiracy in particular. Here are the facts:

- Agenda 21 is a non-binding guidance document assembled by the United Nations member nations and includes recommendations for actions to improve quality, health and sustainability in our communities. Nothing more. It is not a treaty. It does not supersede U.S. law.
- The non-profit ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability is a voluntary association of cities and local governments dedicated to sustainable development. "*ICLEI promotes local action for global sustainability and supports cities to become sustainable, resilient, resource-efficient, biodiverse, low-carbon; to build a smart infrastructure; and to develop an inclusive, green urban economy*". No municipality is compelled or coerced into becoming a member of ICLEI. A municipality's elected officials/decision-makers can choose to become a member or can choose to sever their existing ties with this organization, at any time.
- No one is being forced to move to smart growth areas, live in higher density areas, ride transit, trade in their SUVs, ride bikes or walk to the corner coffee house. Increasing numbers of citizens are demanding these types of lifestyles and development options, so community policies are facilitating them and the free market is responding by building them.
- Climate change is not a hoax, it is real and happening now and overwhelming scientific research has established that it is caused and/or intensified by human activities.

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As the world becomes more complex, connected, crowded and constrained, planners and planning will continue to be placed in more public forums with underlying political, social and ideological issues and agendas. Do we circle the (hybrid) wagons, retire to our (smart growth) ivory towers and ignore misinformation about us and our profession? No. We meet exhaustively with our communities, listen to what they have to say, work with government officials, collaborate with each other and keep ourselves educated as we advance the knowledge of our profession to better plan and serve our communities. But at the same time let's ensure we heed Andres Duany's advice quoted at the beginning of this article, meet this challenge head on and *"Don't let misinformation or falsehoods stand for even five seconds..."*

A sampling of source material, background and related readings:

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/04/us/activists-fight-green-projects-seeing-un-plot.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0
<http://www.watchsonomacounty.com/2012/01/transportation/protest-disrupts-regional-planning-meeting-in-santa-rosa/>
<http://www.triplepundit.com/2012/02/united-nations-agenda-21-iclei/>
<http://www.cnu.org/cnu-salons/2007/02/kotkin-bashes-urbanism>
http://www.lightrailnow.org/facts/fa_00014.htm
<http://www.theatlanticcities.com/politics/2012/08/anti-environmentalist-roots-agenda-21-conspiracy-theory/3091/>
<http://www.betterworldcampaign.org/news-room/web-articles/agenda-21.html>