

A Distracting Doctrine

Instead of fixating on the United Nation's Agenda 21 as a supposed threat to American liberties, conservatives should articulate fiscally responsible, market-driven policies to address the very real challenges facing local governments in the United States.

By James A. Bacon

The anti-Agenda 21 movement, which views the United Nations as the prime mover behind local sustainability initiatives, is a growing force in many states and local governments across the United States. While anti-Agenda 21 theorists share some of the same language and principles as mainstream conservatives, they have little meaningful to contribute to the debate over environmental, transportation, land-use and property-rights issues. Their ill-documented conspiracy talk distracts from the kind of discussions that conservatives should be having. To govern effectively, conservative elected officials need to re-frame the debate over growth and development in a way that is forward-looking, grounded in hard facts and in line with conservative values.

The Anti-Agenda 21 Movement

Over the past few years, the anti-Agenda 21 cause has emerged from obscurity into a force capable of pushing resolutions through state legislatures. The movement is populist and decentralized -- many adherents are ordinary citizens whose passions have been inflamed in local land-use disputes -- although it does have the backing of the John Birch Society and talk show personality Glen Beck. In some states, Anti-Agenda 21 partisans have leveraged their influence by co-opting local Tea Parties and other groups sympathetic to property rights and limited government. Sometimes they find a sympathetic ear among conservative elected officials. But they also use aggressive means -- packing public meetings, singling out politicians for vocal criticism -- to intimidate local officials with more moderate views into going along.

Activists disseminate their views by means of speeches, books, websites, fliers, YouTube videos and social media. There is no definitive source for the anti-Agenda 21 movement. Most writing is impressionistic and scattershot. However, several themes do appear repeatedly in the literature.

(1) The Agenda 21 agreement adopted at the 1992 United Nations conference in Rio de Janeiro is the fountainhead of the global sustainability movement. The document provides a comprehensive plan for achieving "environmental sustainability" and "social justice" at the expense of property rights and individual liberties.

(2) Agenda 21 provides a blueprint for a radical restructuring of the American way of life. Social-engineering goals include returning much of North America back to a wild and natural state, herding Americans into dense urban centers, replacing single family dwellings with multifamily housing and phasing out the automobile in favor of bicycles and mass transit.

(3) Although the United States Congress never ratified Agenda 21, President Bill Clinton advanced its goals through the creation of the President's Council on Sustainable Development. Some writers also point to President Barack Obama's creation of the White House Rural Council and the White House Council on Strong Cities, Strong Communities.

(4) Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are key players in pushing Agenda 21. One of the most influential is the International Council on Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI), which works with member local governments to advance sustainable development at the community level. Another is the Wildlands Network, an organization said to be in the vanguard of the "wildlands" movement to restore much of the continent to a state of nature.

(5) Agenda 21 proponents often cloak their goals by adopting other names such as "smart growth" or "New Urbanism." They implement their goals locally by means of rigged community "visioning" sessions.

The Agenda 21 contras rarely refer to Agenda 21 as a "conspiracy." Indeed, they are very sensitive to being tagged as "conspiracy theory" nuts by their opponents. But their description of how Agenda 21 is being implemented takes on undeniable conspiratorial tones.

In her book, "Behind the Green Mask: U.N. Agenda 21," Rosa Koire writes: "Under the mask of green our civil liberties are being restricted, constricted, and suffocated in every village and hamlet. ... The rulebook is written in the dark."ⁱ

"Sustainable Development is not implemented in the open ... but in back rooms filled with the proper NGO organizations," writes Tom Dewese, president of the American Policy Center. "ⁱⁱ

Local landowners do not have the opportunity to provide input into the local land-use decision-making process, says Dr. Ileana Johnson Paugh, in her book, "U.N. Agenda 21: Environmental Policy." Citizens, she says, "are at the mercy of 'visioning committees' and the board of supervisors, often plants or paid subscribers to the One World Government's UN Agenda 21 document."ⁱⁱⁱ

Sources and Methods

Like every good conspiracy theory, the anti-Agenda 21 credo makes reference to a few indisputable facts. There *is* a United Nations Agenda 21 document, which anyone can find and read on the Internet, on how to implement "sustainable development" worldwide. The U.N. *did* approve that document in 1992. President Clinton *did* enact Executive Order 12852 the next year to create a President's Council on Sustainable Development. Many of the ideas expressed in the Agenda 21 program *do* enjoy wide currency among liberals, progressives and environmentalists in the United States. Within the green movement, there *are* left-wing extremists who advocate the radical transformation of American society and economy, some of whose proposals *do* conflict with property rights, individual liberties and fiscal prudence when implemented at the community level.

But it's a huge step to infer from these facts the existence of a U.N.-based program to impose a radical environmental agenda upon America. And it is downright delusional to see the broad environmental movement, with its many varieties and cross-currents, as the manifestation of a U.N.-orchestrated plot.

The difficulty in critiquing anti-Agenda 21 theory is that it's like trying to nail down the fog. The case presented by the anti-Agenda 21 theorists is so vague and shifting that it defies conventional fact-checking and analysis. Deficiencies in the anti-Agenda 21 literature include:

- **Cherry-picked information.** Agenda 21 theorists have conducted a lot of Google searches, located online documents and cherry picked passages and phrases that support their preconceived notions. Data that does not fit is simply ignored.
- **Leaps of logic.** Theorists connect a lot of dots to reach pre-conceive conclusions. Some of those leaps of logic defy credulity.
- **Paucity of inside information.** The theorists have not identified anyone on the inside of the "conspiracy" who is willing to talk, nor have they uncovered any incriminating documents through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) process.
- **Unwillingness to confront contradictory information.** Organizations cited by the Agenda 21 theorists have disputed the claims made about them. This contradictory testimony goes down the memory hole.

Perhaps the most grievous flaw is that anti-Agenda 21 champions leave so many questions unanswered. They imply that some shadowy group is colluding to manipulate public opinion and the governance process. By definition, a plot requires the existence of plotters. Who are the leaders? What is the chain of command? Is there a specific office in the U.N. or in the United States government that leads this effort, or does some secret society control events behind the scenes? By what mechanisms – other than the local Delphi forums and visioning sessions so often cited as tools for bamboozling the innocents – do the string-pullers make their influence felt? The anti-Agenda 21 theorists insinuate much but avoid making concrete claims that can be disproven.

Similarly, if someone is orchestrating a global plot, where's the money? Someone has to be paying for all those initiatives and all that activism. Does the United Nations have a budget for propagating Agenda 21 activities in the United States and elsewhere in the globe? What programs has the United States government set up to advance the goals of Agenda 21 and/or sustainability? How much money has been devoted to those initiatives? That information should be a matter of public record. I have seen no evidence that the Agenda 21 theorists have the answers. Leaving basic questions unanswered, they write around the holes in their arguments.

A Closer Look

To see how flimsy the anti-Agenda 21 theories are, let's take a look at some frequently made assertions made by the Agenders.

Claim: *The President’s Council on Sustainable Development, established by President Bill Clinton following the U.N. Rio Summit, was the transmission belt for conveying the priorities of Agenda 21 into the United States.*

Reality: Active between 1993 and 1999, the PCSD held 40 public meetings. With a first-year operating budget of \$750,000 and a staff of five FTEs, however, that’s about all it could afford to do – hold meetings. Linking climate policy to the “national agenda for economic growth, environmental protection, and social justice,” the council recommended 140 actions. It dribbled out a few more updates and task force reports the following year, and a final document in 1999. Then it disbanded. All that remains is a website. In the final meeting, several board members expressed frustration that the council would leave no lasting mark.^{iv}

Claim: *President Barack Obama established the White House Rural Council in 2011 as a mechanism to promote sustainability initiatives in rural communities.*

Reality: The council’s focus was economic development; sustainability was a sideshow. With an eye toward the 2012 presidential race, Obama embarked upon a “Rural Tour,” sounding the theme of “job creation.” The White House followed with a steady patten of press releases and other announcements relating to rural issues through September 2012.^v Then the news flow stopped. Far from being a vehicle to stamp the Agenda 21 blueprint upon rural America, the White House Rural Council was a vehicle for President Obama to portray himself as a “jobs president” to rural voters.

Claim: *The International Council on Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI), an international not-for-profit group, is instrumental in propagating Agenda 21 to local governments in the United States.*

Reality: ICELEI did, in fact, participate in the 1992 Rio de Janeiro summit where Agenda 21 was negotiated and written, presenting input from local governments on a range of environmental issues.^{vi} However, ICLEI is a membership-driven organization, not propped up by the U.N., and its sustainability initiatives reflect the environmental priorities of its members. “Sustainability is a mainstream concept, and sustainability initiatives in government, corporate America, academia, and local communities typically have no connection to Agenda 21,” states the ICLEI website. “All ICLEI programs and projects are voluntary, and local governments decide for themselves which programs they wish to participate in.”

Claim: *The Wildlands Network (formerly the Wildlands Project) is engaged in an Agenda 21-inspired plan to create “wildways,” or wildlife corridors, across North America by restricting property rights of land owners in the corridors.*

Reality: The Wildlands Network does no lobbying, does not work on policy, does not purchase land, does not work with eminent domain law, and “has never received a dime from the federal government,” according to a spokesperson. The organization works mainly with private landowners to create wildlife corridors between national parks.^{vii}

Chasing a Phantom

Obsessed by the United Nations, Agenda 21 foes stagger off in bizarre directions, punching at figments of their imagination. A recent example is the move to pass futile and meaningless anti-Agenda 21 resolutions in state legislatures. Consider, for example, this legislation passed by the Missouri legislature at the behest of anti-Agenda 21 forces in May 2013 before it was vetoed (my emphasis):

Neither the state of Missouri nor any political subdivision shall adopt or implement policy recommendations that deliberately or inadvertently infringe or restrict private property rights without due process, as may be required by policy recommendations originating in, or traceable to Agenda 21, adopted by the United Nations in 1992 at its Conference on Environment and Development.^{viii}

What does this resolution accomplish? Infringing property rights without due process is undoubtedly illegal in Missouri to begin with. Why the obsession with Agenda 21? Why the need to single out the U.N.? Does a U.N. connection make a bad idea even worse?

And how does one determine if a particular policy recommendation is “traceable” to Agenda 21? Who makes that judgment and upon what basis? In a world characterized by the global flow of ideas, the thinking behind Agenda 21 was expressed in innumerable books, research papers, essays, op-eds and conferences. How can one prove that a proposal to, say, build a bicycle lane in your home town had its provenance with Agenda 21?

The threat to American liberties isn't the United Nations. The threat is environmental extremists pushing bad public policy without a coherent conservative alternative.

Resolutions like Missouri's that are heavy on symbolism and light on substance don't accomplish anything useful.

Reframing the debate

The focus on Agenda 21 is a gigantic distraction for conservatives bent upon the difficult work of governing. Conservatives must ask themselves, do they want to tackle the real problems of local government? Or are they willing to cede the initiative to liberals and progressives?

What transportation and land use policies should we adopt to accommodate growth and development in America? How should we deal with traffic congestion? How should we advance the goals of clean water, clean air and preservation of wildlife habitat? Which combination of transportation and land use policies can best stimulate job creation and expand the tax base? Which policies will best improve the quality of life?

If conservatives reject the proposals put forth by those who see government as the answer to every problem, what principles -- smaller, less intrusive government, free markets, lower taxes and disciplined fiscal policy -- would they call upon instead to make local government more responsive and efficient?

A critical first step in developing a conservative vision of smart growth is understanding how “suburban sprawl” -- the label applied to post-World War growth and development outside core cities -- came to

be. One of the greatest misconceptions about sprawl is that it was the inevitable result of “free market” forces at work. Even a cursory investigation will show that the car-dependent suburbs are the result of massive government intrusion into the real estate marketplace at the federal, state and local levels.

Zoning codes mandate the separation of residential, commercial and retail land uses, giving rise to local planning bureaucracies and usurping individuals’ property rights. It’s one thing to allow people to live in cul de sac subdivisions, work in office parks and shop in malls surrounded by vast parking lots. It’s quite a different thing to require them to do so as a matter of code. Typical codes effectively ban the building of walkable, mixed-use communities unless a developer is willing to engage in the expensive and risky process of petitioning for a special permit.

Low densities. Many localities have imposed density limitation on new growth with the aim of curbing the impact on roads and schools. But smearing 1,000 people over 1,000 acres of land makes it impossible to provide roads, utilities and public services as efficiently as if they were concentrated in 100 acres or even ten. Low-density growth does not generate enough tax revenue to cover the cost of capital improvements, maintenance and operating costs.

Leapfrog development. Hop-scotch development makes human settlement patterns inefficient by scattering subdivisions, shopping centers and office parks across the countryside, leaving large holes in the urban fabric. Such scatteration, which drives up the cost of transportation and government services, comes from anti-growth politicians restricting development, which prompts developers to skip to jurisdictions farther from the urban core, and the willingness of state and local governments to subsidize road improvements to those less populated areas.

Parking mandates. Zoning codes mandate minimum parking requirements in an indiscriminate manner, giving property developers little incentive to economize on space or develop synergistic uses for parking lots and garages. The result of an excess of space devoted to parking, which drives up the cost of development and harms walkability by pushing buildings farther apart.

And those are just the highlights!

In summary, land use is one of the most heavily regulated and subsidized sectors of the American economy. Not surprisingly land use is among the most dysfunctional sectors of the American economy. Many conservatives perversely defend the institutional arrangements, spawned of government intrusion, that have created contemporary suburbia with its scattered, disconnected and car-dependent pattern of development. That is a disastrous mistake.

Instead of defending the suburban status quo, conservatives should systematically apply the principles limited government to the goal of creating smarter, more livable, more fiscally sustainable patterns of growth. What would such policies look like? Here are some broad brush-stroke answers:

- **Roll back government regulation of the real estate marketplace**, especially rules that outlaw mixed uses. Rethink low-density mandates. Eliminate minimum parking requirements. Replace

zoning codes that separate land uses and with “form-based” codes that aim to protect property values by regulating the physical form of buildings.

- **Restore homeowner property rights.** Upon what philosophical principle does government prohibit homeowners from adding garage apartments or granny flats to their property? Stop restricting single family dwellings to members of a single household. Allow people to devise novel living arrangements.
- **Encourage innovation in real estate development.** County zoning codes throttle innovation. Developer-entrepreneurs should be encouraged to introduce new housing and commercial real-estate products to the market. Let consumers, not comprehensive plans, decide what gets built and where.
- **Deregulate mass transit.** Municipal transit monopolies and taxicab oligopolies are economic dinosaurs. But GPS-enabled smart phones are revolutionizing transportation services. The future will look less like Yellow Taxicab and more like Megabus, Zipcar, Uber, Avego and maybe even Jamaican jitneys. Conservatives should bust up the monopolies and foster transportation competition.
- **Make growth pay its own way.** Conservatives should embrace the principle that people and enterprises should be free to build what they want where they want as long as they cause no harm to others – but they are not entitled to an unlimited claim on the taxpayer to fund the extension of utilities and public services to remote or inefficiently served locations. In sum, new development projects should be structured so as to pay their own way.

If conservatives articulate smart-growth principles consistent with fiscal probity and free markets, they will win the debate. If they dwell on the phantom menace of Agenda 21, they will lose. It’s that simple. Competing in the realm of ideas and real-world solutions is so much more exciting. Let’s get started!

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ⁱ Koire, Rosa; “Behind the Green Mask: U.N. Agenda 21”; The Post Sustainability Institute Press; 2011.

ⁱⁱ DeWeese, Tom; “Here It Is ... The Smoking Gun: The Direct Link between Agenda 21 and Planners”; June 5, 2103; <http://americanpolicy.org/2013/06/05/here-it-is-the-smoking-gun/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Paugh, Ileana Johnson; “U.N. Agenda 21: Environmental Policy”; published on Amazon.com for the Kindle; October 2013.

^{iv} “Meeting of President’s Council on Sustainable Development”; Feb. 10, 1999; <http://clinton2.nara.gov/PCSD/meetings/dcsum.html>.

^v The White House Blog. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2013/06/19/white-house-rural-council-growing-rural-economies-creating-jobs>

^{vi} “FAQ: ICLEI, the United Nations, and Agenda 21”; <http://www.icleiusa.org/about-iclei/faqs/faq-iclei-the-united-nations-and-agenda-21>

^{vii} Llewellyn Hinkes-Jones, “Demented Agitprop: The Myth and Madness of Agenda 21 Conspiracies”; published on Amazon.com for the Kindle.

^{viii} House Bill 42, 97th General Assembly;

<http://www.house.mo.gov/billtracking/bills131/biltxt/senate/0036S.02C.htm>