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## Agenda 21:

# Pathway to a Better Tomorrow or Global Conspiracy to Subjugate Individual Rights?

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*Agenda 21* is a United Nations (UN) action plan designed to provide a practical framework for implementing the sustainable development model, which has been defined by the UN as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). Although it is not a legally binding treaty, the 178 countries (including the United States) that participated in the 1992 Earth Summit unanimously adopted *Agenda 21*. In doing so, they signaled their commitment to promoting consideration of the environmental and social impacts of development decisions at the national, regional, and local levels.

From a practical standpoint, implementing the sustainable development model at the local level means prioritizing conservation of natural resources and sensitive environmental land, and developing urban areas in ways that discourage sprawl, promote mixed-use buildings and neighborhoods, and maximize the efficient transportation of people and goods. While the value of preserving the planet for future generations is generally acknowledged to be a worthwhile pursuit, acceptance of the sustainable development model is far from universal. Here in the United States, a small but extremely passionate minority view *Agenda 21* as an elaborate and subversive scheme orchestrated by the UN to erode individual freedoms and assume control over sovereign nations (and their resources). Conservative commentator Glenn Beck summed up this sentiment, saying that “sustainable development is just a really nice way of saying centralized control of all of human life on planet Earth.”<sup>1</sup>

Groups and individuals affiliated with the Tea Party and the property rights movement are determined to fight against what they see as serious threats to individual rights and the American way of life. Because many U.S. communities are adopting *Agenda 21* at the local level through city and regional plans (including climate action plans, regional transportation plans, and general plans), local planning commission meetings, design charrettes, and city council chambers have become the front line for this ideological battle. Although it might

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<sup>1</sup> “Agenda 21” The UN’s diabolical plan to for the world is explained on the Glenn Beck Show, YouTube video, 3:06, posted by “Steve Kemp,” June 23, 2011, [http://youtu.be/esJY2SK\\_4tE](http://youtu.be/esJY2SK_4tE).

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be tempting to dismiss these groups as isolated pockets of misguided, irrational conspiracy theorists, it is important for planners to take a closer look at their claims and try to understand the basis of their opposition to *Agenda 21*.

## Propaganda or Progress?

According to opponents, in order to convince people to go along with *Agenda 21*'s development model, the UN has orchestrated "the biggest public relations scam in the history of the world."<sup>2</sup> The scam starts by promoting the idea that we should feel guilty for living our "super-sized" American lifestyles—defined by our big suburban houses, gas-guzzling cars, and rampant consumerism. Next we are told that our sins can be forgiven if we accept our new identity as global citizens and commit to reducing our impact on the earth. We are told that we should "redefine progress" in terms of what we are able to sacrifice for the greater good as opposed to what we are able to acquire for ourselves.<sup>3</sup> Opponents characterize this as a kind of "social engineering" that serves to convince citizens to willingly forfeit their fundamental rights to privacy, property, and individual choice.<sup>4</sup>

For this reason, opponents of sustainable development like to characterize much of the sustainability-related terminology, messaging, and advocacy as propaganda designed to brainwash communities into thinking that they *want* to live in dense urban environments and *prefer* to travel on public transit. The sustainable development model goes by many names such as "smart growth," "new urbanism," "walkable communities," and "transit-oriented development," all of which have been enthusiastically adopted by planners, community groups, active transportation advocates, and others. But many *Agenda 21* opponents consider these terms insultingly "antisuburban" and unfairly biased against the American Dream of single-family homeownership (Mencimer 2011).

Critics also react strongly against the idea that environmentally sensitive areas should be set aside and protected from further development. Much of the backlash against *Agenda 21* has come from rural landowners who are convinced that the UN's long-term plan (to be enacted by local governments) is to acquire, through eminent domain, all of the rural lands surrounding densely populated megacities and designate them as protected areas that humans will be restricted from entering.<sup>5</sup> The "Wildland Project" map, which shows the United States with a handful of specific "human habitation zones" surrounded by "restricted biodiversity conservation corridors," is widely circulated to drum up opposition to the UN and *Agenda 21* (Melton 2013).

## Community Manipulation

The fact that *Agenda 21* is a nonbinding, voluntary framework does not diminish opponents' concerns. In fact, they feel that this only enhances its subversive nature because people are made to believe that they have been given a choice and a role in the decision-making processes that impact their respective communities. Many opponents believe that

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<sup>2</sup> *Agenda 21 – Behind the Green Mask* – Rosa Koire, YouTube video, 1:43:33. Posted by "QarenAnn," September 27, 2012, <http://youtu.be/GoMaYJwLyu4>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Michael Shaw: *Agenda 21, "The Ultimate War: Globalism vs. America"*, part 1, YouTube video, 54:33. posted by Steve Kemp, September 30, 2011, [http://youtu.be/h\\_o8JJSNN6g](http://youtu.be/h_o8JJSNN6g).

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communities are being systematically manipulated using something called the Delphi Technique, which is a method for directing a group to reach a consensus in which the outcome has already been predetermined. As opponents explain, “facilitators,” who have been specially trained to use psychological manipulation techniques and social pressure, are brought in to run planning meetings and community-visioning workshops for the purpose of artificially manufacturing community support for smart growth principles and plans (Burns 2005).<sup>6, 7</sup> Opponents challenge the legitimacy of the public participation process because, they argue, by the time community meetings and public hearings take place, general plans have already been altered and communities re-zoned to ensure that “stack and pack” development is approved. Therefore, the community input process is just a tool for minimizing dissent.

## Opposing Ideals

When it comes to mapping out an ideal future for our communities, it is difficult to see how a compromise can be reached between supporters and opponents of *Agenda 21*'s sustainable development model because the two viewpoints seem to be fundamentally incompatible on several levels. On the one side are those who believe that the deterioration of the ecosystem is the defining challenge of our time and that our survival as a species demands that we move collectively towards a new way of life. Additionally, many in this camp are genuinely enthusiastic about the idea of transforming our cities into more compact, connected, efficient places that can be easily navigated without the need for a personal vehicle. On the other side are those who believe that the threat of environmental collapse is exaggerated and is being used as a fear tactic to establish a new world order where individual rights are subordinate to the will of a centralized international government. Their view of development based on urban density and transit-oriented design is that of a dystopian future in which all people are corralled into overcrowded cities where their mobility will be restricted and their right to privacy denied.

Regardless of where one stands on this issue, the reality is that the global population is projected to grow to more than nine billion people before the year 2050, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, and it is essential that we adopt long-term strategies for addressing additional demand for resources and housing (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). America's population alone is projected to increase by more than 40% by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau 2012) and as the President of the American Planning Association recently put it, “What I want to hear from opponents of sustainable development is where are you going to put 50 million new housing units over the next few decades? So far, I haven't gotten an answer to that question” (Mencimer 2011).

## What Can Planners Do?

The role of planners is to envision and implement strategies that make communities healthier, safer, more prosperous, and more equitable for current and future generations. But what are planners to do when the communities we are working to make more sustainable see us as part of the problem? There is no easy answer to this question. However, when it

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<sup>6</sup> See also UN Agenda 21 Exposed with Rosa Koire, YouTube video, 39:29, posted by “corbetteport,” October 20, 2012, <http://youtu.be/L7T7ulzNG7o>.

<sup>7</sup> See also Agenda 21 – Behind the Green Mask – Rosa Koire, YouTube video, 1:43:33. Posted by “QarenAnn,” September 27, 2012. <http://youtu.be/GoMaYJwLyu4>.

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comes to working with *Agenda 21* opponents, there are several things that planners should consider.

First, if there is to be any hope for a productive dialogue, we should resist the urge to vilify suburbanites for choosing a way of life that, lest we forget, planners had a role in creating. Promoting the importance of environmental protection and the benefits of compact, connected communities can be done without harping on the destructive nature of sprawl—which only serves to implicate and alienate those who call the suburbs home.

Second, planners should make every effort to understand the concerns of these community members by researching their arguments and recognizing the implications of planners' authority in the process. While some opponents claim that *Agenda 21* is part of a larger plot to establish centralized government control of society, others are more concerned that sustainable development policies will negatively impact economic growth and housing affordability. It may be tempting to disregard all opposition voices as part of a misguided conspiracy theory, yet by doing so planners may fail to legitimize and respond to real concerns of community members. Planners should endeavor to be as informed as possible about the implications and limitations of land-use and zoning regulations so that they can both defend their merits and dispel misconceptions related to property rights.

Finally, planners should remain ever vigilant about improving and enhancing the public participation process. While the notion that our profession involves manipulating community members may sound ridiculous to those of us in the field, we should recognize that these are very real concerns of some members of the public. Such preconceptions demonstrate the need for more transparent, collaborative, and representative public involvement in the planning process. Finding an ideological middle ground on the government's role in creating sustainable communities is a challenge that should not be underestimated. Nevertheless, these suggestions may be helpful as a first step in discovering a shared vision for the future. ■

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