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From Place Shakers

"You're Terminated, Hippie." — Where Does That Leave Local Sustainability?

by Hazel Borys | Feb. 25, 2011

"You're terminated, hippie." — Where does that leave local sustainability?

No fate but what we make? Sorry, hippie, you're terminated.

Federal government to sustainability efforts: You're terminated.

In a blockbuster-style showdown, the House Appropriations Committee started a furor this month as they proposed the elimination of HUD, USDOT and EPA sustainability programs in 2011-12, as well as suggesting the rescinding of dollars already awarded by the Sustainability and TIGER grant programs.

As municipalities, counties and regional COGs scramble to find ways to focus the weak development market forces into more sustainable patterns of walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods, the possible removal of the federal support is discouraging.

Looks like we're gonna have to go indie.
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In this new age of municipal austerity, forward-thinking local and regional governments are looking for ways to spend our remaining cheap oil in human-centric ways, instead of our auto-centric habits of the last 80 years. For obvious reasons.

We've talked last week about being stripped of the comfortable delusion that somebody else will pick up the tab, and how new partnerships are generating Smarter Growth. We've been making the case for how great placemaking can save money and grow the economy. We've looked at urban retail downtown and sprawl repair in the 'burbs, and their wealth-building potential at both ends of the spectrum.

Such conversation is good but, lest you get lulled into thinking that's enough, I turn now to three of my colleaguesin-arms, currently slugging it out in the trenches of community building, for some wider insight.

Dan Reuter

Land Use Division Chief, Atlanta Regional Commission

Georgia is one of a dozen or so states that require a comp plan, thanks to the State Growth Management Law (1989). If Senate Bill 86 passes, comp plans will become optional, in hopes of decreasing short-term costs for local governments. Similarly, Florida's Governor Scott is trying to dismantle the FL Department of Community Affairs. The DCA is credited with curbing sprawl, overdevelopment, and environmental degradation, but its opponents say it's a roadblock to development even though it approves 93% of the local plans it reviews.

This may be coming to a statehouse near you. Politicians often look at other states, and start borrowing strategies before they've been proven.

And recently the most borrowed tendency is deleting planning and environmental initiatives, by taking away state mandates on local governments. Perhaps at the time we need them the most.

Local proponents are fighting back by pointing to the results of planning and development for the past decade, and the large numbers of successful local actions increasing livability in the face of decades of low-density, automobileoriented development.

What other process might replace the current one? Ad hoc, short-term considerations will inform decisions. Citizens will have no choice but to vent at public meetings in lieu of an agreed upon local vision.

When planning is successful it's because local governments did have plans. Then regional entities can come in and help implement the consensus plan.

Many proponents of the bill are from smaller local governments and rural areas who could have a reduced or alternate planning standard. The successful medium and larger towns and cities realize the exceptional need, and continue fighting for local and regional planning.

Putting its money where its mouth is, on Wednesday the Atlanta Regional Commission awarded Livable Centers Initiative grants to 14 local governments.

Scott Polikov
President, Gateway Planning

Scott and I were talking about cities, towns and counties who are implementing their context-sensitive comp plans by adopting form-based codes for economic development purposes. Getting ready for our PlaceMaking@Work webinar next month on the subject.

Similar to the ARC, the North Central Texas COG has handed out $200 million to enable Sustainable Development. Here, building a boulevard instead of perimeter arterial gets rewarded. DPZ and Gateway Planning's Craig Ranch received $3 million from the COG to build a boulevard, which anchored $500 million of new development. If it had been put into arterial improvements to facilitate traffic, there wouldn't have been enough roadway capacity to anchor the retail and commercial.

Richardson in Dallas, for example, has great cool urban neighborhoods, so this is where large corporations are locating. Gen X and Gen Y's are driving location decisions by corporations — form-based codes allow intensity and location to make the argument to big business.

About the feds, how can the current federal system authorize under a broken system anyway? They're short funds in the reauthorization period. What can regions to do leverage limited dollars? Infrastructure decisions by regional governments should require some de-programming of the larger roadways, because the money is not in the pipeline to maintain them.

It's largely a modeling problem. Funds flow based on the regional congestion calculation — the more congestion you have, the more money you get. Yet we know that it's not the lane-miles alone that can alleviate congestion, but also the development patterns.

The MPOs and the local constituent communities need to agree that they'll let developers do walkable, multimodal urbanism — reduce congestion and increase tax base. Travel demand models for the region and for the city says, "The level of service is broken for this part of the city, so we'll add lane miles."

Allocation based on congestion levels is extremely inefficient. With limited dollars, we have to carefully leverage. In the past, we knew the Feds were going to continue to send us highway dollars, so didn't have to worry about growing tax base.
Local communities should ask MPOs to adopt measures of effectiveness to shift a share of dollars to transportation development that encourages sustainable development patterns. Create a competitive environment at the regional level where improvements to the network through multi-jurisdicational collaboration gets extra credit. Then go back to the Feds and say that we're willing to do more with less if they'll let us build complete streets.

Form-based code is the DNA or the glue that makes sustainable development possible. FBCs tie the economics of transportation investment to the economics of the development outcome. FBCs aren't site-specific or projectspecific. A form-based environment leverages limited transportation dollars. If a city or community is not leveraging FBCs, then they will not be economically competitive. Feds should reward communities that are willing to transition from sprawl models.

Joe Minicozzi

Interim Executive Director, Asheville Downtown Association
New Projects Director, Public Interest Projects, Inc.

I was just in Washington at a SmartGrowth America round table. One thing we all agreed is that the value of placemaking has been well proven and documented. People prefer walkability. Downtowns are doubling and tripling their real estate value.

The taxable value of downtown Asheville, NC, for example: 1991: $104 million; 2000: $350 million; 2007: $552 million; 2010: $665 million. That's just filling up existing buildings with vertical mixed-use and incremental infill projects. This also runs through the bubble. Thanks in large part to a number of people in the public and private sectors that understood the potential of the urban environment, and visionary folks like Julian Price, founder of Public Interest Projects (PIP) and Pat Whalen, President of PIP, who invest in architecture and programming with a long term view.

Some people love to say that Smart Growth is too expensive. Is it? Where? Compared to what? Sprawl doesn't have to make its case. Yet Smart Growth has made the case exhaustively (750kb .pdf). In Washington, people are saying, "We need to talk about national policy, national policy, national policy." All of this community fabric out there that's broken has little to do with the feds. It's because of lousy local decisions. All our comp plans say brilliant things, but without the local zoning that can back it up.

It's amazing that we think that we're a well-run government, but we're not. To some extent, the current anti-government movements have some legitimacy, but they are going about it the wrong way. If government were a business, it wouldn't work. We continue to approve projects that won't pencil out for their public sector costs. And by that, we continue to incentivize the wrong thing.

Our state, North Carolina, has adopted Complete Streets, and I don't see much practice of that in our neck of the woods. At the top level, they totally get it, but the culture hasn't changed in the departments. It's still a bunch of engineers who think in engineering sorts of ways.

Title 23 is the law that the feds created to create MPOs – it requires multi-modal Complete Streets – and yet the MPO budgets don't reflect the law.

When a WalMart comes in, they have a whole real estate department, and they can tell a better story to our politicians than our planning staff can — or is allowed to. We have to change that. If the argument is financial, then planners need to understand and use finance.

We've built systems where the majority of our population is now suburban. Those people aren't paying their portion of the real cost of the system they require. We're getting this transference through the government to try to cover their costs. And without new growth bridging the gap, we're seeing a major shortfall.

The states and the feds had their heart attacks last year, because their revenues are hooked to income and sales tax. Local governments are having their heart attacks now, because property tax lags the market cycle by 18 to 24 months.

We've programmed ourselves that we can't raise taxes, but neither can we pay for the services that we provide to low density development. Policy dictates that there be get a rational nexus between the cost of the municipal services and the taxes paid, yet our appraisal standards make us do the opposite – letting the biggest infrastructure consumers pay the lowest tax burden.

We need to look at land as a product. How we develop land should be guided by what it can produce. Just like a farmer looks as his land and crop yield — what's our tax yield?

There’s an opportunity cost to each WalMart we build. For Asheville, it’s over half a downtown of opportunity. For Florence, it’s the renaissance core. And yet there are huge tax incentives to build big box, without generating revenue to the government.

There’s an accountability that needs to come home. We’re getting what we incentivize. Some would call that democracy, but it’s also bad business.

It’s up to local planners and officials to understand that local policies are facilitating local financial collapse. It’s locally created and it can be locally changed.

So what are we talking about? Right now, we often incentivize what we don’t want – sprawling, auto-centric placelessness. How do we start to incentivize what we do want – walkable, complete, convivial neighborhoods? How do we get there from here? Change our zoning laws to encourage sustainable development patterns. Change our transportation planning to retrofit poor economic performers, poor environmental performers, poor societal performers. And maybe even change our property tax methods of calculation.

Which brings us back to James Cameron, who conceived the Terminator to begin with and who has proven himself remarkably adept at leveraging available sources of money to innovate towards new ways of doing things. According to Cameron, we’ll make all the decisions in the next decade that will determine whether or not we survive as a species.

No small challenge. But regardless of your personal beliefs about what that might mean, there’s no debating that livable places require change from our current business as usual practices.

A plethora of resources and support groups are champions of the cause. And are making it work, with or without federal dollars. Transect Codes Council. Form Based Codes Institute. The Code Study. Congress for the New Urbanism. New Partners for Smart Growth. Reconnecting America. Transportation for America. Urban Land Institute. US EPA Smart Growth. Smart Growth America. CEOs for Cities. New Urban Network. Original Green. Planetizen.