

Origins of the Visioning Process

Relating to Local

Land-Use Planning

This paper discusses the origins of the “Visioning Process”. This is not only a common land-use planning tool in Arizona, but has become institutionalized by many local governments and non-governmental organization (NGO) activists across the United States, as well as around the world. It is specifically designed to build consensus from a diverse group of stakeholders.

Visioning Process Summary:

- Elected officials and their staff see Visioning as an opportunity to get a better fix on what their citizens want from government.
- Civic minded volunteers are recruited to this cause with the idea of making positive improvements in living conditions and economics, along with special emphasis on environmental management and conservation practices.
- Typically, local interested citizens, lead by trained facilitators, are broken into groups. The groups then begin by looking ahead; imagining their community in an ideal 21st Century, some 10 to twenty years in the future. The individual groups rank these ideals according to priority.
- The lead facilitator then presents a summary of the various groups’ “findings” to local officials. Local government staff incorporates these concepts into government planning documents, and then these are officially adopted by the local board.
- Often random sampling polling is utilized to demonstrate the strength or weakness of the various issues.

While the above explanation is brief, the history of the Visioning Process should help one put this issue in a better perspective. The common denominator is the objective of “sustainability”.

Sidebar: In this context, sustainability means *to live and function in a way that can be sustained for ever: current generations can not use the world's natural resources faster than they can be replaced for the following generation, and no party can use more than their fair share of these resources.*¹

There are three major components which led, in the greater part, to the formulation of the Visioning Process (a summary of these major actions follows) as it exists today:

1. The Biodiversity Treaty – U.N. (1992) and its rejection by the U.S. Senate (1994)
2. Agenda 21 (1992 through today)
3. Smart Growth, Region 2020 and their relationship to the Visioning Process

The Biodiversity Treaty

The Treaty defines biodiversity as “the variability among living organisms from all sources including, inter alia [*not all inclusive*], terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems.” Parties [*nations*] to the Biodiversity Treaty “affirm sovereign rights over the biological resources found within their countries, while accepting responsibility for conserving biological diversity and using biological resources in a sustainable manner.”²

Sidebar: This act of *affirmation of our sovereign rights* to the world is legally at odds with property rights and other laws of United States of America, not to mention sovereign States Rights. Among other things, the Treaty also promotes relocating people into higher density areas with travel corridors between these areas of habitation. A buffer zone surrounds these corridors for limited travel with the goal of leaving large tracts of land vacant and un-used to achieve said biodiversity.³

1993 Headline: CLINTON SAYS HE WILL SIGN BIODIVERSITY TREATY...

(AP) President Clinton committed the nation yesterday to an international treaty protecting plants and animals and to a timetable to reduce greenhouse gases. In his first major environmental speech as president, Clinton reversed the course of President George Bush, who had rejected both those actions. Clinton promised to sign the biodiversity treaty that the United States, alone among major economic powers, refused to endorse at last year's Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro.⁴

On June 29, 1994, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved the ratification of the Convention on Biological Diversity (Biodiversity Treaty). Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-TX) rose on the Senate floor with Dr. Michael Coffman's maps and GBA (*the Treaty was the embodiment of the Wildlands Project and the "smoking-gun" evidence was contained in the Global Biodiversity Assessment a.k.a. GBA*) text excerpts to oppose the Treaty. Bob Voight called Mitchell's office during the morning of September 30 in a final attempt to get Mitchell to withdraw the Treaty. Voight believed that if Mitchell knew that the UN had lied about the existence of the GBA, Mitchell would withdraw the Treaty. Within an hour, and about an hour before the Senate debate, Voight received a call from Mitchell's office reporting that the Treaty would be withdrawn.⁵

In it's report, "Towards a Sustainable America", President Clinton's Council on Sustainability mentions "sustainability" no less than 85 times. It also noted that "The International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) was instrumental in the adoption of Local Agenda 21 at the Earth Summit. Agenda 21 identifies specific objectives that can be used to guide sustainable development efforts. Since then, the U.S. branch of ICLEI has helped local governments assume a major role in sustainability efforts and has developed 'one-stop' guides on technical assistance and funding sources, and other references. ICLEI has calculated that if all 55 cities and municipalities participating in its Cities for Climate Protection Campaign meet their voluntary goals, their emissions reductions will be equivalent to 10 percent of the U.S. obligation under the Kyoto Protocol."⁶

Sidebar: From the Arizona Republic, April 23, 2007: "Phoenix has contacted ICLEI, a national organization that helps cities set up climate-change programs, to find out how to address greenhouse-gas emissions."⁷

Agenda 21

Agenda 21 is a comprehensive plan of action to be taken locally, nationally and globally by organizations of the United Nations System, Governments, and Major Groups [*"NGO's"*] in every area in which human impacts on the environment.⁸

The Biodiversity Treaty and Agenda 21 were both approved at the United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

Sidebar: The United Nations' Vancouver Plan (1976) is the parent document from which Agenda 21 and the Biodiversity Treaty derives most of their provisions. The Preamble of the "Land" section of the UN Vancouver plan reads as follows: *1. Land, because of its unique nature and the crucial role it plays in human settlements, cannot be treated as an ordinary asset, controlled by individuals and subject to the pressures and inefficiencies of the market. Private land ownership is also a principal instrument of accumulation and concentration of wealth and therefore contributes to social injustice; if unchecked, it may become a major obstacle in the planning and implementation of development schemes. Social justice, urban renewal and development, the provision of decent dwellings-and healthy conditions for the people can only be achieved if land is used in the interests of society as a whole.*⁹

Agenda(s) 21 (when implemented *locally*, it is described as Local Agenda 21, or "LA21", as it is commonly referred to today) is described by its founders, ICLEI (the most notable NGO in this arena), on its website:¹⁰

In the lead up to the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, ICLEI developed and proposed the concept of LA21. It was endorsed at the Summit as Chapter 29 of Agenda 21, the global action plan for sustainable development. This initiative has led to the single largest movement of local governments toward a common goal. More than 6,400 local governments in 113 countries worldwide responded to the goals of *Agenda 21* by developing and implementing "local" Agendas 21.

With the creation of its LA21 Campaign, ICLEI has positioned itself in the growing LA21 movement as a developer and promoter of standards for LA21 planning. The mission of the LA21 Campaign is to build a worldwide movement of local governments and associations dedicated to achieving sustainable development through participatory, multi-stakeholder sustainable development planning and the implementation of resulting LA21 action plans.

The Next Phase of LA21 (Again from ICLEI, 2002): Moving LA21 into "Action" status:

- During the Local Government Session at the World Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa (August 2002), local government leaders from around the world, as well as representatives from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), UN-HABITAT and the World Health Organization (WHO), joined ICLEI in launching Local Action 21 as the next phase of LA21. Local Action 21 will support local governments' ongoing efforts in response to *Agenda 21*, the Rio Conventions, the *Habitat Agenda* and the *Millennium Declaration*.
- Local Action 21 was launched as a motto for the second decade of LA21. It is a mandate to local authorities worldwide to move from agenda to action and ensure an accelerated implementation of sustainable development. Local Action 21 will strengthen the LA21 movement of local governments to create sustainable communities and cities while protecting global common goods.
- The movement from LA21 to Local Action 21 will reflect the following advances in local sustainable development planning and management. First, the creation of sustainable communities and cities will be furthered by identifying and removing barriers to sustainable development...¹¹

Smart Growth

Smart Growth was also introduced in the 1990's and has been praised by many in the American Planning Association, the American Institutes of Architects and other organizations. It is an urban planning and transportation theory that concentrates growth in a center city to avoid urban sprawl; and advocates compact, transit-oriented, walkable, bicycle-friendly land use, including mixed-use development and open space with a range of housing choices. It values *long-range*, regional considerations of sustainability, economics, climate and environmental protection above a short term focus on such things. Its goals are to achieve a unique sense of community and place; expand the range of transportation, employment and housing choices; equitably distribute the costs and benefits of development; preserve and enhance natural and cultural resources; and promote public health.¹²

Its critics; economists, public policy/planning experts and private property rights advocates argue that Smart Growth leads to greatly increased land values (for some and valueless land for others) and that due to this, people with average incomes can no longer afford to buy detached houses. Additionally, it ignores the desires and preferences of most housing consumers and ultimately wastes public funds.¹³ They also feel they have strong evidence to support their conclusions that "Smart Growth strategies tend to intensify the very problems they are purported to solve."¹⁴

Region 2020

To illustrate, the following are some excerpts from Central Alabama's exercise titled: "Region 2020: The Vision".¹⁵

- Region 2020 is a citizen driven process. In this case, over 5,000 people participated in the process by providing ideas and insights. Every idea, goal, and strategy contained in this report came directly from the citizens of Region 2020. The sheer number of participants, from all parts of the Central Alabama' region, makes the resulting vision an accurate mid realistic reflection of the wishes, dreams, and aspirations of the region's residents.
- Region 2020 is a bold and daring vision of the future for the Central Alabama region. The vision is a sweeping one of many parts. There are goals, which are broad statements of what the region has the potential to accomplish. There are strategies that indicate the programs and initiatives we need to accomplish these goals. And then there are action steps, which are the specific activities we need to set the wheels of implementation in motion. These goals, strategies and action steps are interconnected. Taken together, they set a clear course -- a road map for the Central Alabama region.
- From the "Goals" of Central Alabama Region 2020: A region that protects, preserves, enhances and conserves its natural resources and its native biodiversity that actively supports and promotes cultural diversity... that provides superior educational opportunities for all citizens (regardless of age, race, ability and gender)... that has an affordable, accessible, safe and efficient public transportation network... that is rich in strong, diverse, beautiful and safe neighborhoods, towns and cities in which to live and work... that provides enhanced employment opportunities for residents of all ages that fosters cooperation; promotes efficiency, shares resources and engages in regional issues while maintaining local identity... that is recognized for its loving, respectful, and responsible citizens who work for racial harmony.

Conclusions

After the Biodiversity Treaty was not ratified by the U.S. Senate in 1994, the “sustainability movement” did not have the legal force of a Treaty to advance their efforts here. LA21 has since been augmented to “Action” status by ICLEI, by enacting local planning and zoning ordinances in the U.S. to reflect their goals. ICLEI hired and trained numerous facilitators in addition to creating a “one-stop shop” offering technical assistance and funding sources to promote sustainability. The movement now focuses on smaller regions in the States, using the LA21 template and Smart Growth tools. The offspring of this is often referred to at local levels as “Region 2020”, but more recently it is being commonly referenced generically as the Visioning Process.

The Visioning Process, and others like it, is now common-place in the land-use arena and has become a virtual requirement within the planning community. In major metropolitan areas today, very few major projects are approved without being forced to go through a similar exercise to some degree, often with the Visioning Committee its self. Some Visioning groups ultimately transform into independent NGO’s and believe being part of this process is natural as they “speak” for the community, its values and its desires for a better tomorrow. They feel they have the data to back up these statements and are often correct.

Most all of the parties agree the consequences of these sustainability-driven processes directly result in substantially higher costs of growth, particularly involving transportation and affordable housing. Time delays and artificially inflated property values drive end-user prices up, as these NGO’s decide which properties are “buildable” and which are not. Real world analysis shows not only that the private sector suffers from these and other related artificial cost inflations, but government is impacted equally, if not more so. Advocates contend that these sacrifices are required in order to achieve the higher and greater purpose of saving our planet.

While stakeholders have some indirect interest in projects, individual property rights are an important fact that is not lost on property owners and on some local government officials. This inevitably creates political tension. A property owner with his “bundle of rights” may represent a few votes, whereas, in theory, a community group represents substantially more. Politicians also think about *their own* “sustainability”.

At present, we are witnessing the culmination of this institutionalized sustainability effort being played out in Florida. At this writing, activists have nearly collected enough signatures to place on the statewide ballot an initiative titled “Hometown Democracy.” The Florida Hometown Democracy Amendment is a proposed state constitutional amendment that would take responsibility for planning away from local planners and elected officials and require the voters to decide on every comprehensive plan amendment themselves.

¹ Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainably>

² Quote: Columbia University <http://www.ciesin.columbia.edu/TG/PI/TREATY/bio.html>

³ See Biodiversity Treaty Map of U.S. at <http://www.apfn.org/apfn/us-wild.jpg>

⁴ Source: Rita Beamish, ASSOCIATED PRESS. Published on April 22, 1993, Page A03, Philadelphia Inquirer

⁵ Source: <http://www.sovereignty.net/p/land/biotreatystop.htm>

⁶ Quote: Page 139 of the President’s Council on Sustainability Report <http://clinton2.nara.gov/PCSD/Publications/tsa.pdf>

⁷ Quote: <http://www.azcentral.com/news/articles/0423mayors0423.html>

⁸ Quote: United Nations: <http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/agenda21/index.htm>

⁹ Quote: <http://habitat.igc.org/vancouver/vp-d.htm>

¹⁰ Source: <http://www.iclei.org/index.php?id=820>

¹¹ Quote: ICLEI <http://www.iclei.org/index.php?id=802>

¹² Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smart_Growth#Environmental_protection

¹³ Source: Thoreau Institute www.ti.org/ and the Cato Institute www.cato.org/

¹⁴ Quote: Wendell Cox <http://www.heritage.org/Research/SmartGrowth/Test051502.cfm>

¹⁵ Source: <http://www.region2020.org/page4.html>