

High Country News

FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE WEST

Fearful of Agenda 21, an alleged U.N. plot, activists derail land-use planning

Jonathan Thompson | Feb. 6, 2012 | *From the print edition*

In November, La Plata County Commissioner Kellie Hotter called local land-use planning "a blood sport." She wasn't kidding. Since last spring, as this southwestern Colorado county considered a new comprehensive land-use plan, carnage has piled up. By mid-December, casualties included a fired planning commissioner, a resigned county planning director and the plan itself -- a 400-page document that took two years, \$750,000 and 137 public meetings to produce.

Even planning veterans in the rural West -- where it's not uncommon for mind-numbing meetings to erupt into verbal fisticuffs -- were shocked by the bloodshed in La Plata County. But perhaps most surprising was who emerged the untarnished victors: Activists who believe that smart growth, clustered development, smart meters and even bike paths are all part of a nefarious United Nations plot to rob citizens of their liberties.

They may sound like folks on the fringe. But they are increasingly influential -- and they've sabotaged planning efforts nationwide.

The movement's ideology isn't new: resentment of government interference and vigilant defense of private-property rights, especially when environmental initiatives are involved. What is new is the alleged villain: Agenda 21, a two-decades-old U.N. document that encourages sustainable development worldwide. The Agenda is being foisted, opponents claim, on often-unsuspecting local

governments by ICLEI, a nonprofit that offers planning tools, greenhouse gas inventory software and technical support to some 550 government members in the U.S.

The result? "Government will control how hot your shower may be, how much air conditioning or heat you may use," writes Tom DeWeese of the American Policy Center, an intellectual parent of the end-Agenda 21, or Agender, movement. "The policy of Agenda 21 comes in many names, such as Sustainable Development, Smart Growth, historic preservation ... and comprehensive planning."

La Plata County might not seem like a yeasty environment for fermenting right-wing movements. It's voted mostly Democratic in major elections for at least 10 years. The population center is Durango, a college town with a disproportionate number of professional cyclists, lawyers and raft guides, not to mention a fabulous bike path. But remnants of the older West remain, most notably some 3,000 oil and gas wells. A far-right faction also still festers. When Colorado's GOP was fractured by extremist and moderate infighting in 2006, the struggle was centered here.

Planning has always been contentious, and the county commission expected some controversy when, in 2009, it charged its staff and a team of consultants with developing a community-driven vision for the county's growth over the next 20 years. The plan would contain no actual regulations, but it would provide a critical road map for rewriting the county's land-use code.

A diverse, 17-member working group was formed to represent the community, and the public was encouraged to attend meetings. From the beginning, a vocal minority suspicious of government interference was present. At one early meeting, after a consultant spoke about preserving agriculture, possibly through zoning, sheep-rancher J. Paul Brown said: "If you're looking for a fight, keep that crap up!" Such sentiments were incorporated into the draft plan.

Last spring, an ambitious vision emerged to rein in sprawl, encourage bicycling and public transportation, protect agriculture and promote sustainability. Respect for private-property rights and conventional energy development were also

emphasized, and the draft was sent to the planning commission, an appointed body that in Colorado has the final say on county comprehensive plans. "There wasn't a word in that plan that wasn't vetted by the working group," says Charlie Deans, the lead consultant.

But around the same time, the Agender movement was slithering out of the political primordial soup. Since as early as 2003, a few far-right commentators such as DeWeese had banged the Agenda 21 drum, but few listened. Then, in 2009, DeWeese took his ideas to the Tea Party, and its branches began adopting the Agender platform. "It was a slow acceleration," says Don Knapp, an ICLEI spokesman who has tracked the movement.

During the 2010 mid-term campaign, Dan Maes, a doomed Republican and Tea Party Colorado gubernatorial candidate, announced that Denver's bike-sharing program was part of a U.N. plot -- probably the first high-profile mention of Agenda 21. In a debate for Colorado House District 59, La Plata County's J. Paul Brown declared that Obama had a secret army and that the U.N. is "going to control our land and our guns." Gleeful Democrats assumed the rhetoric would kill Brown's chances for a seat long held by moderates. They were wrong: Brown won.

Also in 2010, Rosa Koire started the Post-Sustainability Institute, which campaigns against Agenda 21 and "communitarianism." Despite the fact that she's a registered Democrat who looks fresh from auditions for a Gloria Steinem bio-pic, Koire, a Bay Area real-estate appraiser, has become a Tea Party YouTube hero and Agender leader. Then, last June, Glenn Beck did a 14-minute anti-Agenda 21 monologue on Fox News.

"It really picked up steam after that," says Knapp. Last month, Koire and dozens of fellow Agenders packed a planning meeting in Marin County, Calif., shouting anti-planning slogans. Agenders in Benton County, Ore., went after a plan to protect river corridors. One told the *Corvallis Gazette-Times*: "Riparian, sustainability -- it's the words that give 'em away. Their goal is to take over the world by taking over the water, the land and the food." Last fall, Newt Gingrich

vowed to cut funding for "any kind of activity for United Nations Agenda 21" if elected president. And at least 16 communities have ended their ICLEI membership in protest.

In La Plata County, by late July the anti-planning crowd started referencing Agenda 21 in their public comments. County planner Erick Aune had never even heard of it. So he attended an "evening of Agenda 21 education" hosted by the Four Corners Liberty Restoration group, where the featured speaker masterfully laid out a 200-year conspiracy culminating in the comprehensive plan. By the end of that month, more than 100 people had signed a petition against it, saying it was "based on emotional feel-good ideas that are designed for social engineering and social equity that trample our rights as free people."

In December, after whittling the plan down to about 40 pages and snuffing out an entire chapter on sustainable development, the La Plata County planning commission unanimously voted to scrap it altogether. Aune resigned a day later.

The reasons the planning commissioners gave were somewhat vague. The plan was too values-based; it didn't reflect the will of the community. But there's little doubt that the Agenders influenced the process. "I'm for planning, but I'm not for the ideological, political, social engineering that went into this document," commissioner Steven Kallaher said in December. Earlier, of community concerns, he said, "Someone who owns hundreds of acres in the county doesn't want someone living in the city who rides a solar-powered bicycle to tell them what to do."

"The (Agenders) group was very organized and very focused and very intent on delivering a consistent message," says Aune. "They wanted (the comprehensive plan) to go away because it represents government and control to them."

The movement's meteoric rise is probably due to the fact that it's just the most recent incarnation of an age-old ideology. "Local debates about property rights have been around for decades," says Knapp. "What's new is this idea that it has to do with the United Nations or the imposition of some outside force ... that there's this tyranny at play.

"(It's) motivated a lot of people to get involved in local politics," he says. "It's a really good scare story. It's big on fear, it's big on fiction, and it's short on fact."

Copyright © High Country News