



“The death knell of liberty”

“Agenda 21 and Sustainable Development are really cloaked plans to impose the tenets of Social Justice/Socialism on the world.”

The Tea Party is conducting a well-organized Attack on “sustainable communities”, “smart growth”, and the many policy objectives associated with those ideas throughout the U.S. Planners, developers, elected officials and advocacy groups have been working to respond. Excellent material has been produced on managing conflict at meetings, influencing media coverage, and planning ahead to counter this coordinated Attack.

The reactionary campaign can be defused by recognizing that the power of extremists does not depend on the weakness of their ideological opponents. Extremists gain power from the weakness of the broad middle ground. By focusing on moderate to conservative elected officials at the local and state levels, advocates can develop communications that defend and strengthen public process for managing growth and development.

Understanding the Attack

It isn't new. As a tool for gaining political power, the exposure of conspiracy and a ubiquitous enemy has a rich and illustrative history. But this attack, both on smart growth and on the many social objectives and public interests involved, has been mounted for at least the past twenty years. Its argument is based in a simple, powerful frame: *government control vs. individual liberty*. The addition of a UN conspiracy, hatched at the United Nations Earth Summit 1992, is a brilliant and powerful weapon, because of what *is* new this time: the Tea Party. A small but highly strategic and well-funded reactionary faction is using coordinated materials to activate dedicated citizen activists. Small groups of these local citizens are generating turn-out and pressure on local and state elected officials.



The extremists are not the target audience for a campaign to defuse the Attack. Do not get drawn in to debate on their terms. Do not rebut or refute their statements.

Strategic Objectives

To neutralize and then turn to advantage this opposition campaign, communications must focus on local (and some state) elected representatives. We want them, *whatever their views* on any portion of the broad advocacy agenda, to confidently defend existing government process for planning and land use decisions to meet local objectives. "Existing process" means zoning, planning, all related public decision making, and citizen engagement in those decisions.

Defending process does not mean delivering messages about process. It means talking about shared local objectives, and results that have been and can be achieved by making good local decisions about planning and land use. It means talking about property values and desirability, and the rights of property owners to protect the value of their property. It means talking about the importance of public participation in making public decisions about shared resources.

Set the communication objective to reach moderates and conservatives, many of whom oppose one or several aspects of the "smart growth" agenda for change. Give them a clear message and perspective that those officials can apply to their own objectives, and that they can confidently present to their constituencies. Design communications that increase their ability

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March 2012

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and confidence to stand up to ideological attack, even if they are opposed to any combination of specific objectives for equal opportunity, transit, housing, conservation of resources, et al.

What's needed is not a defense of smart growth. Some of the target audience more closely agrees and identifies with the opposition on many things than with "smart growth advocates". They must be forced to argue their positions in terms of real world consequences, not ideological principles.

Reframing for the Middle

The advocacy community faces a challenge: to frame the communications from the perspective of those who with whom we disagree. Our strong desire is to persuade them to agree with us about the changes needed, in housing, transportation, resource conservation and the rest. We have and must continue to use effective communications to advance these improvements. But winning new supporters is a) not *necessary* to get them to stop the Agenda 21 Attack; and b) not *effective*, because it excludes a large part, and what may be the most important part, of the target audience.

Every local elected official should say some version of this:

"The public interest and public purpose (of our zoning and planning laws/ procedures) is to
Maintain and improve property values,
Support the local economy,
Listen to the people who live here and will be affected by any public decisions.
We have decisions to make, specific decisions at hand, about how best to maintain and
improve the value of our property and community. Let's get to work."

When public officials speak from this perspective, they will be blunting the extremist attack. More importantly, they will be defining the issue in terms that support the kinds of changes and improvements that are needed. Instead of being pulled into the opposition frame of liberty vs. government, they will be laying the groundwork for continuing successes.

The Agenda 21 Attack is a significant opportunity for those advocating for better growth and land use policies, including those engaged in Federally supported planning projects. The opposition has raised a public question: who gets to say what we do? why plan or manage? As advocates succeed in getting office holders to publicly reply, on our terms of debate, we increase the political will to make positive decisions.

Strategy for Defusing the Attack

AGENDA 21: WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN?

WHO CAN TAKE THAT ACTION?

WHAT DO THEY NEED TO HEAR?

WHO SHOULD THEY HEAR FROM?

HOW CAN WE DELIVER THE MESSAGE?

1. Weaken the influence of office holders who share the ideology behind the attack, and prevent current and future office holders from being pulled into its orbit. While only a minority of elected officials identify with the extremist ideology, a much larger number disagree with some or all of the policy objectives of the sustainable communities-smart growth movement. The action needed is for members of that majority, instead of being stampeded, to stand up publicly to ideological pressure. Elected officials at all levels must maintain current support for existing process, and argue their policy positions on the merits of the specific policies, not on ideology.
2. Target moderate to conservative office holders. Seat all the elected officials in your territory in one auditorium. Put those most supportive of your positions in the golden first few rows, treat them well because they are key messengers; put the Tea Party in the back rows. Most of the hall is the target audience. Some are opposed to many of the positions related to smart growth. Many have serious doubts about at least some of the positions. But *all* believe they are working for the common good. Because the Attack's new strength is at the local activist level, local officials are the primary target. Because the Attack's strong frame can do a lot of damage at state legislative levels, state legislators are also a key target.
3. Elected officials must be equipped and inspired to defend existing government process to protect and improve property values, to support local economy and economic development, and to be responsive to the participation and the interests of the people they represent. They must recognize how their own interests, and the interests of constituents, are served by existing planning and regulation. This includes understanding where property values come from, and the consequences of planning and zoning. Their own interests also include local economic development, taxpayer costs, infrastructure, and shared resources. Message development should focus on the actual interests of the various targets. In all cases, they need to hear that their constituents expect to be heard, to participate in public decisions for public benefit.
4. Key messengers to reach this target audience, in order of strategic importance, include: those who are themselves members of the target audience; planners and others professionally engaged in development and maintenance of the built environment; constituents; and advocates for specific interests and changes. National and state advocacy organizations focused on smart growth and sustainable communities should be especially cautious to avoid playing into the opposition frame.
5. Use all available media, and do not underestimate the world's most powerful medium: what we say to each other.