

Is sustainability un-American?

By Dana Nichols | Published: March 29, 2011
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This is the fifth Tuesday of the month, and so there may be people out there who are missing their weekly dose of the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors. So here's something that happened last week:

The board was considering whether to hire Stantec Consulting Services, Inc. to design some much needed bridge upgrades. Tonja Dausend of Burson had done some background research on Stantec and told the board that on the company website, the firm touted itself as being "recognized as a world-class leader and innovator in the delivery of sustainable solutions." Dausend went on to say that in her view, "sustainable development" is anti-American. She said she believes it is part of a United Nations effort to impose control over local governments like the one in Calaveras County.

At least one member of the Board said he shared Dausend's concern. Supervisor Darren Spellman said he wants to avoid hiring firms with anti-American principles, and he'd like to have some kind of "litmus test" firms should pass.

Supervisor Merita Callaway disagreed vigorously. "I don't know where you're getting that it's anti-American," Callaway said. Callaway said the American Way is to allow any individual or company to lobby for what it perceives as its interests. She said the American Way is also to award bids based on a firm's ability to complete the job and whether it can do the work for the lowest price. "The American Way is for companies to bid on projects" Callaway said.

Spellman wasn't convinced. "If they do things that are subversive to what makes us America, then we need to take a second look at that," Spellman said.

Barring the discovery of some magical horn of plenty that can cough up more iron ore, petroleum, uranium and fertile soil whenever we would otherwise run out, it is debatable that anything we modern humans do is or even can be sustainable. We are too many locusts for the size of the corn field, as revolutions and riots in hungry countries around the world attest. As Americans who for the last few centuries have been able to expand into what was once a very lightly-populated continent, it seems like eternal plenty is our birthright. So it can seem like plaintive nagging for anyone to suggest that we should change our ways and try to be "sustainable," because to entertain that idea would be to admit that our soils, water, fuels and so on might eventually run out. I see the Stantec company website somewhat like the hype on boxes of cereal: Fat Free! No added sugar! Organic! Marketing hype is about as American as it gets. I suspect all Stantec was saying is that the firm will strive to provide a long-lasting product.

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