

Conspiracy Theorists Hit the Mother Lode:  
Agenda 21 in Calaveras County

by

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Have you heard of Agenda 21? If not, come to Calaveras County. You will hear of little else. Read the letters to the editor in the local papers, listen to public comments at a Board of Supervisors or Planning Commission meeting, and you will think Agenda 21 is a United Nations conspiracy to rob us of our freedom and, in particular, our property rights in order to establish a one-world government in which humans will be caged in high-density ghettos and animals will freely roam the open space confiscated through eminent domain. You will think sustainability is synonymous with socialism, communism, and the rise of Nazi Germany.

Calaveras County is my home. I have ties to the county that go back three generations. Calaveras is part of the historic Mother Lode region on the western slope of the central Sierra Nevada Mountains. It is a beautiful rural county that crosses six watersheds related to the Mokelumne, Calaveras, and Stanislaus Rivers. It is 1,036 square miles and rises from low rolling foothills to mountain peaks. With a scant population of 45,578, Calaveras has only one incorporated city and numerous small towns that are relics of the Gold Rush era. Calaveras seems like an unlikely target for the United Nations, but, nevertheless, there is an intense conflict here over the real or imagined presence of Agenda 21.

Since 2005, as a volunteer community activist, I have advocated for growth and development in Calaveras County that would be *sustainable* over time. It has been my intent to promote community-centered development with decreasing levels of density radiating from the town core in order to maximize infrastructure, decrease the cost of community services, provide clear development guidelines, and protect agricultural land, primarily rangeland, and also habitat, watersheds, and rural character. In so doing, I was labeled an agent of Agenda 21.

Specifically, Agenda 21 is the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, which, along with the Statement of Principles for the Sustainable Management of Forests, was adopted by more than 178 Governments at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. Agenda 21 is a non-binding agreement. According to the United Nations, “Agenda 21 is a comprehensive plan of action to be taken globally, nationally and locally by organizations of the United Nations System, Governments, and Major Groups in every area in which human impacts on the environment,” which is quite an ambitious goal. The preamble tells us that the Agenda 21 process “marks the beginning of a new global partnership for sustainable development.” Hence, anything *sustainable* is linked to Agenda 21.

Constitutionalists, Tea Partiers, property rights advocates, and members of the Calaveras County Taxpayers Association are connecting the dots between the United Nations and Calaveras County, primarily through the identification of specific terms that should alert us to the presence of Agenda 21. First, and foremost, is the word *sustainable*, but other terms include *smart growth, environment, green, community, regional, collaboration, social justice, vision, consensus, stakeholders, diversity, high-density, mixed use, walkable, bikeable*, and so on. As one county supervisor put it, we are guilty of promoting Agenda 21 by “linguistic association,” and, if you promote Agenda 21, you are un-American. Be careful what you say and how you say it, because the Tea Party language police are quick to draw a line to Agenda 21.

I don't know of any local organizations that promote Agenda 21, but that doesn't stop the accusations. The more charitable in the anti-Agenda 21 crowd allow that I and others who promote sustainability may simply not realize what we're doing. One member of the Calaveras Planning Coalition summed it up, “The Agenda 21 lens permits only two scenarios: in the worst case, I am an active agent of a socialist plot; in the best case, an unwitting dupe of a socialist plot. Actually, I am a citizen who wants to protect the environment and cares about social justice. And I think good planning is related to both of those goals. That's all.” But by using terms such as “environment,” “social justice,” and “good planning,” the writer has revealed her allegiance to Agenda 21, whether she knows it or not. How's that for a Catch-22?

California's General Plan Guidelines say, “The basic concept of sustainability is meeting the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development can be further defined as promoting the ‘three E's:’ environment, economy, and equity. For example, a decision or action aimed at promoting economic development should not result in decreased environmental quality or social inequity.” I consider sustainability a legitimate response to an acknowledged environmental crisis as well as a sound approach to life. Sustainability exists independent of any government or entity. That is the nature of ideas.

Groups such as the Calaveras Planning Coalition promote the principles of sustainability and smart growth as a means to address a dwindling supply of finite resources and a growing population. However, the Coalition also promotes transparency in government, public participation in local land use decisions, a sense of place, and a local economy. So, while sustainability and smart growth may provide inspiration, the proposed solutions to our land use challenges would, ideally, respect the desires of the local residents and the unique characteristics of our rural landscape.

The Planning Coalition is an affiliation of local community groups that advocate for public participation in the development of community plans and in the currently ongoing update of the county's General Plan, which is alleged to be one of the primary tools for the implementation of Agenda 21. The General Plan is essentially a state mandated twenty-year blueprint for growth and development that assigns underlying land use and overlying zoning. It has seven mandatory elements: Land Use, Circulation, Housing, Conservation, Open Space, Noise, and Safety.

The General Plan assumes that planning is a beneficial practice that will reflect the needs and wants of the people through a collaborative process that includes public and stakeholder participation. As the General Plan Guidelines confirm, “State law specifies that ‘[d]uring the preparation or amendment of the general plan, the planning agency shall provide opportunities for the involvement of citizens, public agencies, public utility companies, and civic, education, and other community groups, through public hearings and any other means the city or county deems appropriate’ (§65351).”

If you believe the general plan process is one of the tentacles of Agenda 21, you would interpret public and stakeholder participation in the planning process as “planning for other people’s property” and as putting the rights of the community over the rights of individual property owners, who should be given pre-eminence in all land use decisions. As a member of the Taxpayers Association wrote, “We must insist that individual property rights be placed first in all planning negotiations and actions,” because “Agenda 21 needs to be stopped if we are to preserve our American heritage of freedom.”

So, in order to stop Agenda 21, property owners should be able to select their own land use designation and zoning, or, at least, be guaranteed the land use designation and zoning at their time of purchase will exist into perpetuity, unless, of course, the property owner wishes to exercise his or her right to use the property in a different way, in which case, he or she should be granted a general plan amendment or zoning change. And the change should be granted in the name of economic stimulus and the free market. Property owners would, thus, wield considerable power over the nature and character of the community, which, local Constitutionalists maintain, has no rights.

A local woman mailed me a book which “documents” the ascendancy of the collective (now masquerading as the community) over the rights of the individual. In Behind the Green Mask: U.N. Agenda 21, Rosa Koire writes, “In a nutshell, the plan (Agenda 21) calls for governments to take control of all land use and not leave any of the decision making in the hands of private property owners.” She also warns, “...there is a plan for world governance that is in place and eating like a metastasized cancer into every nation, free and bound, in the world. Under the banner of saving the planet we are drowning liberty. Under the mask of green our civil liberties are being restricted, constricted, and suffocated in every village and hamlet. The plan is imposed locally.” And opposed locally.

Those engaged in the fight against Agenda 21’s invasion into Calaveras County resent what they perceive as government interference in their lives. The leader of the Taxpayers Association explained the role of government. “Sometimes we forget that the nature of government is force and the only justification of that force is the protection of the people’s natural rights to life, liberty and property.” Without water, clean air, and food, I have no life. Without life, liberty and property are irrelevant. The attitude of the Agenda 21 conspiracy theorists toward preservation of the environment seems to be to leave everyone alone, and each, according to his or her own best interests, will do the right thing for the community. It doesn’t occur to them that we have environmental regulation, the *force* of law, because such a strategy has already failed.

The environmental crisis is real. As Wendell Berry wrote eleven years ago in his essay, *The Idea of a Local Economy*, “The problems of pollution, species extinction, loss of wilderness, loss of farmland, loss of topsoil may still be ignored or scoffed at, but they are not denied.” Even Koire admits, “I’m not against making certain issues a priority, such as mindful energy use, alternative energy sponsorship, recycling/reuse, and sensitivity to all living creatures.” One would assume this is because she believes in the need for such priorities. Koire defines being green as “using energy efficient ways to conserve, and using intelligent means to preserve our lives on the earth.”

However, like all believers in the Agenda 21 conspiracy I have encountered, Koire offers no way to establish her identified priorities and no definition of the “intelligent means” which will preserve or *sustain* the earth. There is a persistent unwillingness to actually address the problem. In fact, the primary strategy of those who fear Agenda 21 appears to be derailment. When one man was asked to help resolve a controversial issue at a local community plan meeting, he shouted, red-faced, “I’m not here to help!” He was there to criticize, malign, incite, and accuse. He was there to derail the process and the plan.

The local conspiracy theorists are adamantly opposed to grant funds that promote sustainable development, “Money from federal or state agencies or private foundations for new ‘Sustainable Development’ programs must be refused and we must transition out of any existing ones.” This is nearly impossible as one of the goals of government grants is to ensure sustainability through the creation of integrated infrastructure, which often involves regional planning, which, in turn, is opposed as a form of governance by unelected representatives who are not held accountable to the people.

The Agenders, as they’re sometimes called, recently opposed Calaveras County participation in an Integrated Regional Water Management Plan, in spite of the fact that the Sierra Nevada provides 60 percent of the water for California through a system of reservoirs, dams, and canals, which, of course, requires regional planning. Such planning is one of the ways small counties of origin like ours get a seat at the table when other people plan for our water. If we don’t participate, our water, and likely more of it, will still be taken. Illogically, anti-Agenda 21 property rights advocates demand unlimited access to groundwater and increased access to surface water, but oppose regional water planning, environmental protection for watersheds, and grant funding for water infrastructure.

Agenders don’t want the government telling them what to do and manipulating them with funding, even though grants are one of the ways in which our tax dollars are returned to our neighborhoods and communities. Locals are taking a cue from the Republican National Committee (RNC) which rejects the “United Nations Agenda 21 destructive strategies for ‘sustainable development’” and “any grant monies attached to it.” In January of this year, the RNC adopted a resolution “exposing” United Nations Agenda 21, which will be recommended for adoption as part of the Republican Party Platform at the 2012 convention.

The resolution says, in part, “the United Nations Agenda 21 is being covertly pushed into local communities throughout the United States of America through the International Council of Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) through local ‘sustainable development’ policies such as

Smart Growth, Wildlands Project, Resilient Cities, Regional Visioning Projects, and other ‘Green’ or ‘Alternative’ projects.” The conspiracy is everywhere, not just Calaveras County. But wait a minute, if ICLEI operations are covert, how does the RNC know about them?

Not all civility has been lost, and I can still laugh, but I am, nevertheless, saddened by the general baseness of the debate in Calaveras County, the McCarthyesque guilt by association, linguistic or otherwise. A flyer that was distributed in my community compared sustainable development and Agenda 21 to the tactics used in Hitler’s rise to power. Koire’s book hurls the same tired insult, the fallback slur of the unimaginative. One individual is currently a regular fixture at Board of Supervisor meetings where he is loud, confrontational, and disrespectful. He doesn’t seem to support anything, except the Agenda 21 conspiracy. How does he propose that we ensure adequate water, clean air, and food if we do not acknowledge that these most basic necessities can only be preserved and sustained with cooperation and engagement as a *community*?

As a child of the American West, I am a romantic. I love the image of the iconic loner against a backdrop of vast open space, but it is apparent to me that we must now balance the needs of the community with the needs of the individual if we are to retain any vestige of that open space. The world has grown small. The context in which we live has changed. The population continues to grow, but the amount of land does not. We do not exist in isolation. We are, after all, engaged in the pursuit of “a more perfect *Union*.” I support a sustainable Calaveras County. I support a sustainable world. I am open to a discussion of how that may be achieved, but there seems to be little hope of a sustainable conversation.

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