

Agenda 21: Myths and Facts

What is Agenda 21?

Increasingly, American planners working with the public on local plans are hearing concerns about Agenda 21, a United Nations report on policies on settlement patterns, poverty and the environment that involved 178 governments attending the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992. It is a non-legally binding set of ideas and recommendations to countries, especially developing nations, in support of sustainability and environmental responsibility as part of efforts to combat poverty. The entire document, as well as additional information, can be found here: <http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/agenda21/>

Below are some of the misconceptions, exaggerations and outright mistruths that have been disseminated by opponents of Agenda 21 as it relates to planning and planners in the U.S.:

Myth: Agenda 21 means the same thing as planning.

Fact: Planning is a way for all members of a community to be engaged in a local and cooperative process designed to create a blueprint for the future that meets the unique needs and values of the area. Planning in the U.S. dates back to the founding of the nation, long before the U.N. was founded and Agenda 21 drafted. Planning in the U.S. is a tool for communities and citizens to shape growth and their future. It is guided by local residents, constrained by state laws, and implemented by local elected officials. Planning helps inform how to build economic vitality and resiliency while maintaining and protecting community and property values. Among other things, planning enables communities to:

- Guide their future;
- Promote economic development;
- Protect historic areas, neighborhoods, farmland and community features; and
- Limit the obligations of the government by strategic building and maintaining infrastructure through capital improvement planning and investments.

Myth: Agenda 21 is part of Local, State or Federal law, and support for its policy recommendations is legally binding.

Fact: Agenda 21 is not a legal document, and does not infringe on the sovereignty of any nation or the independence of the local planning process. Some states and local communities have adopted their own sustainable development policies that reflect the respective values of their own residents. Communities in the United States that use comprehensive planning do so independently in order to develop public policies that meet the community's long-term goals and values. Nothing in federal law is aimed at implementing Agenda 21 or requiring planning to address the issues discussed in Agenda 21.

Myth: The federal government is implementing Agenda 21 through new programs that mandate local planning.

Fact: Comprehensive planning is, and remains, a quintessentially local activity guided and governed by state statutes. New federal programs, like the Partnership for Sustainable Communities, offer federal support for communities seeking to leverage federal funds to enhance their communities in the way they see fit. The federal role in planning is very limited, without mandates, and supportive of local and regional visioning because it is essential to good government and good business.

Myth: Planning, as a result of Agenda 21, is against single family homes, car ownership, discourages family farms and undermines private property rights in rural areas.

Fact: Planning protects private property and oftentimes preserves and enhances its value. It is a tool for preserving neighborhoods, providing certainty to homeowners, and safeguarding agricultural land, as well as promoting transportation choices. Planning is neutral; it does not make value judgments for a community, but is a tool for communities to preserve that which they value.

Myth: Terms such as “smart growth,” “growth management” and “comprehensive planning” are code for Agenda 21 policies, which transform rural communities into compact urban centers while denying suburban growth in all cases.

Fact: There is no causal relationship between the terms and concepts of “smart growth,” “growth management” and “comprehensive planning,” and Agenda 21. Any such implication or reference is a fabrication; it has no basis in fact or reality. Comprehensive planning is the process in which transportation, utilities, housing, recreation and the environment are considered as they relate to the values and goals of the community over the long-term. “Smart Growth” and “Growth Management” are planning approaches some communities choose. These concepts refer to the idea of mapping a future for development that conserves resources, expands choices and encourages strategic investment in communities as a means of promoting economic prosperity and quality of life.

Myth: The American Planning Association is one of several Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), tasked with the implementation of Agenda 21.

Fact: The American Planning Association (APA) has no affiliation with or authority regarding any policy goals and recommendations of the U.N. APA receives no money or other support from the U.N. APA gives no funds to the U.N. APA is an independent, non-profit, non-partisan organization.

None of APA's programs, products or services, including the independently written *Growing Smart Legislative Guidebook: Model Statutes for Planning and the Management of Change, 2002 Edition*, are linked to Agenda 21. The “Growing Smart” Guidebook is a menu of planning options and ideas for states and localities to consider based on successes around the country. It offers practical tools for communities to address issues such as protecting farmland, promoting affordable housing, and encouraging economic development. Planning enables civic leaders, business interests, and citizens to play a meaningful role in creating communities that enrich people's lives and make responsible solutions to local challenges possible.

Myth: Public participation in the planning process is contrived, and planning professionals have predetermined outcomes.

Fact: Plans are fundamentally an expression of citizen input and engagement. Any good planning process is fully open and transparent. Planning relies on meaningful public participation because only through shared understanding, involvement and support will any plan be successful. Planners are part of their communities, and are invested in their community's growth, prosperity and value, not in the implementation of certain development patterns.

Myth: The infrastructure is being created for a post-private property era in which every aspect of human life is subject to a global central government, and the ultimate goal of planning is to transfer land from citizen to government control.

Fact: Among the fundamental protections and guaranteed freedoms set forth in the U.S. Constitution is the right of citizens to own private property. Planning in the U.S. is the democratic process through which well-informed public policy is implemented, policy that protects and supports a community's values and priorities as well as the rights and property of citizens.



American Planning Association

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