



SMART GROWTH MADNESS

On Friday, the San Diego County Planning Commission will consider doing to the County what was done to the City last August: adopting the county version of City of Villages.

Like the City's controversial new housing plan, this County of Towns and Greenbelts is steeped in the language of smart growth lore—picturesque country towns, verdant farms and rolling ranches recalling Ben Cartwright's Ponderosa.

An email memo landing in inboxes around the county this week asks people living in the cities of San Diego, Solana Beach and Del Mar to turn out for the commission hearing and cheerfully chant the mantra of Green belts for the Good—and Density for the Damned.

Inviting the victims of the smart growth strategy to this party is like asking Eliot Ness to waltz with Al Capone. It is the genius of the arrogant that assumes community planners would do anything other than shout ole for the bullish efforts to save the country side by dense packing their neighborhoods.

Apparently nobody promoting the new strategic plan was listening during the City of Villages hearings when hundreds of people turned out to decry the city's version of smart growth because there were no guarantees that classroom space, recreational facilities or even decent streets were fiscally possible in the newly envisioned metropolis.

More importantly, the plan gave an unelected bureaucracy even more power to reinterpret community plans to increase commercial building size and residential density without public review by providing a new moral authority.

Characteristically, the email memo set up the combatants as if this were the roaring 1980's: property rights extremists in black hats gobbling up our resources versus the white-Stetsoned Greens saving the planet.

But this is not the 1980's when developers duked it out with the rest of us all the way to the courts and back over preservation of open space. The much admired Multiple Species Conservation Plan solved a lot of those issues, creating some strange alliances along the way to defining appropriate wildlife preserve boundaries.

Today, having laudably saved San Diego from wall-to-wall red tile roofs, environmentalists turned their energies to urban planning, sometimes allied with the same developers they fought in the past, in the belief that if they turn our cities into human ant hills, the real ants can live in peace in the back country.

To no avail, the city's community planners have begged the urban greens to put the breaks on smart growth plans until regulations and processes are in place that would protect community plans, ensure public participation in planning their neighborhoods and prevent further denigration of our urban and coastal canyons.

Instead, the purveyors of density have sat by while "smart growth" principles were used to invoke regulations to produce the dumbest kind of growth even before the passage of City of Villages and the County of Towns.

The poster kiddies for "smart growth madness" are two little known zoning regulations passed two years ago in the City of San Diego that reduce the number of required parking spaces for commercial buildings and residential projects in areas where public transportation is available.

One zoning ordinance lowers parking space requirements for commercial projects in "areas receiving high levels of public transportation service." The other allows one residential tandem parking space to count as two when calculating allowable density in areas close to public transportation opportunities.

The operative word is opportunity, because as anyone who has ventured into the world of San Diego style public transportation knows, alternatives to the car are far from appealing or useful.

In real urban village areas that fall under the new parking space rules like La Jolla, Mission Hills, Hillcrest and Little Italy, with their struggling retail shops, parking will become even more intolerable than it is now, sending folks screaming back to the ugly parking lots and convenient access of Big Box shopping centers. They already are.

In neighborhoods that are under the tandem parking rules, like everywhere along the I-15 and Mira Mesa Blvd corridors and most beach areas, fewer parking spaces mean more allowable units without any infrastructure or public facility improvements. It does not mean fewer cars—just more parking on streets throughout our neighborhoods.

Revoking this bizarre parking space reduction idea would reduce the "idiocy" factor in smart growth policy by a factor of many.

Until smart growers listen to the folks who live with the consequences of their grand schemes, community representatives will not be waving pom poms for City of Villages or County of Towns any time soon.