Smart Growth is definitely categorized as being liberal

by Randy Bright http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=6029

An interesting article by James A. Bacon appeared recently on the Bacon's Rebellion website entitled Smart Growth for Conservatives – Smart growth is too important to leave to liberals. Conservatives must articulate their own vision for creating prosperous, livable and fiscally sustainable communities."

I found this article interesting because he seemed to be reaching out to conservatives, and at times seemed critical of liberal thought in regards to Smart Growth. However, it appeared to me that even though he could articulate what conservatives believe in regard to planning, he didn't understand why conservatives don't accept the liberal version of Smart Growth.

He wrote, "There is nothing intrinsically liberal or conservative about the idea of creating more efficient human settlement patterns that expand the range of housing and transportation options while reducing the cost of government. Rather than getting stuck defending an indefensible status quo, conservatives need to articulate their own vision in a manner consistent with conservative principles."

I would argue that this description of Smart Growth is absolutely a liberal idea. Let's start with the word efficient.

Efficiency is a term that is used in liberal circles to describe a balance between consumption and production. But what is efficient in this regard may not necessarily bring about a good quality of life. Yes, it may be more efficient to force the population into high-density housing where they can walk to most of the places they need to go, but it is certainly not a desirable way to live for most people.

But if we were to accept that definition of efficiency, who would decide what it means? Scientists, engineers, planners and politicians. How about the citizens? Shouldn't they have a say?

"Human settlement patterns" is a particularly disturbing phrase. It implies that there must be a plan with a limited number of choices to choose from, not that we can choose to live any way we wish. "Expanding the range of housing" actually means adding housing to areas where it is hasn't been allowed under Euclidean codes (which can be argued) while eliminating others (such as the suburbs and living in the country, both of which are being demonized).

Expanding the range of "transportation options" is also disturbing, because it primarily means eliminating or greatly reducing the use of the car, while shifting transportation modes to walking, cycling, buses, light rail or high speed rail. But in terms of transportation, the automobile has been and still is the most important factor in advancing the quality of life. If we are going to argue for efficiency, the automobile is far more efficient than any of the other modes, and it

allows mankind to advance because it provides one aspect that none of the others can – freedom to go where one wants to go when one wants to go in a reasonable amount of time.

The idea that expanding housing and transportation options "while reducing the cost of government" is a complete contradiction. There is no way to apply this as a universal principle. For example, there may situations where high-rise housing is more economical to build than a subdivision, but there will certainly be others where the reverse is true. It all depends on existing infrastructure, market demand and numerous other factors.

Mr. Bacon argues that conservatives are "stuck defending an indefensible status quo." Mr. Bacon, I have been defending it for the last ten years in this column. It's not at all indefensible. In fact, it has been quite easy criticizing many of the aspects of Smart Growth. There are plenty of examples of Smart Growth principles that aren't so smart.

To Mr. Bacon's credit, he did articulate what he believed conservatives believed fairly well. In fact, he put the blame for land use controls squarely where it belonged with the "progressive movement". But he also wrote, "conservatives have given so little thought to conservative smart growth, it's not always clear what those details are."

The short answer to that is that we don't think about it because we believe in freedom. Some of the things we find in Smart Growth – like urban growth boundaries – would never have occurred to us. And while we may agree with those in the Smart Growth movement that the Euclidean codes are too restrictive, we believe that the Smart Growth movement has simply swung the pendulum of control to the opposite side.

I encourage my readers to read Mr. Bacon's article. It is enlightening, and if nothing else will help you understand how wide the chasm is between liberals and conservatives on this issue.

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