

‘Intelligent urbanism’ raises a whole host of suspicions

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Years ago, in the early 90’s, there was a term for the condition that President Trump addressed in his June 9 speech: The Third Deficit.

It was called the Third Deficit then because the first two were already taken: one was the budget deficit and the second one was the trade deficit. The Third Deficit referred to our decaying infrastructure of roads, bridges, airports, buildings and many other kinds of infrastructure.

I applauded his speech because he addressed one of the biggest job-killers we suffer from now, which are the regulations that impede the permitting process and result in expensive delays if not outright abandonment of projects.

Regulations also intimidate and discourage investors from even considering a construction project. In fact, projects that do make it to the construction phase are often sold before they are even finished because relatively few investors have the patience or expertise to sort through the complicated process of obtaining permits. In short, these projects have become a real commodity.

This past week was President Trump’s infrastructure week, so it was ironic and telling that I received an invitation to attend a webinar on something that was specifically unfamiliar to me, but similar to other movements that I have written about over the last decade or so.

The webinar invitation said that it would “illustrate the practices of land use planning, placemaking and intelligent urbanism and how implementing these practices can have a positive effect on individuals and surrounding communities throughout the life cycle of a project.”

I had not heard of the specific term intelligent urbanism, so I found a 13-page Wikipedian treatise entitled Principles of Intelligent Urbanism. (PIU)

This document described PIU with ten principles: a balance with nature; a balance with tradition; appropriate technology; conviviality; efficiency; human scale; opportunity matrix; regional integration; balanced movement, and institutional integrity.

As with all of the other smart growth plans, there is a focus on making the urban setting a more liveable place through centralized planning. And as with all of the other smart growth plans, I am always suspicious when a movement uses the words smart or intelligent in the context of presentation. It is more than just a presentation, it is a challenge, even an intimidation tactic that immediately sets the stage to prevent conflict or disagreement. In short, how do we know that a plan that is self-described as smart or intelligent really is? Because they say it is.

As it is also is with other smart plans, there is a focus on high-density development and discouragement for the use of automobiles. It states, “A major concern of this principle (efficiency) is transport. While recognizing the convenience of personal vehicles, it attempts to place the costs (such as energy consumption, large paved areas, parking, accidents, negative balance of trade, pollution and related morbidity) on the users of private vehicles. Good city planning practice promotes alternative modes of transport, as opposed to a dependence on personal vehicles. It promotes affordable public transport. It promotes medium to high-density residential development along with complementary social amenities, convenience shopping recreation and public services in compact, walkable mixed-use settlements. These compact communities have shorter pipe lengths, wire lengths, cable lengths and road lengths per capita. More people share gardens, shops and transit stops...Good city planning practices promote compact settlements along dense urban corridors, and within populated networks, such that the numbers of users who share costs are adequate to support effective and efficient infrastructure systems. Intelligent urbanism is intended to foster movement on foot, linking pedestrian movement with public transport systems at strategic nodes and hubs. Medium-scale infrastructure systems, whose catchment areas overlap political constituencies and administrative jurisdictions, result in transparent governance and accountable urban management.”

I can only imagine the thousands of pages of regulations such a concept will generate, as other plans have already done in so many American cities.

Liberty is the answer, not regulations. I hope President Trump has someone taking a critical look at this movement and others that depend not upon freedom, but on codifying a concept with the force of law. I think Americans have had their fill of regulations.



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