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Planning as Power Politics: In Dane County, Planning as a Punch and Judy Farce

by Bob Bowman

State statute requires, as the first step in comprehensive planning, that the governing body establish written procedures for public participation and input at each stage of the planning. The details of it are left to each jurisdiction. However, so central is this process to the law that one can presume courts will require that it be done in a good faith, effective way. Jurisdictions which do not fully honor this requirement can expect to have their comprehensive plans overturned.

Given the importance that the law assigns to public participation, input and influence, one would suppose that Dane County takes it seriously. No, Dane County does not. The Dane County board was so contemptuous of public involvement that it passed Resolution 70, ramming it through by a bare majority of the board, in order to kick two duly elected rural Supervisors out of their duly elected positions in charge of directing the county comprehensive planning. They did this in order to put an urban-elected Supervisor in charge of it, and despite the fact that a county comprehensive plan applies to rural areas and not to urban areas.

The county executive, Kathleen Falk, was so contemptuous of public participation that she signed Res. 70, thereby "washing her hands" of comprehensive planning, declaring it "a board affair." No, county planning is a county affair, and Falk sullied it by her action.

It is hard to imagine a greater contempt for the public than to disenfranchise the representatives which the public, by its democratic processes, had put in place as their agents. Such a message from the urban faction that controlled the Dane County board has the effect of chilling public participation in the process, and of chilling intergovernmental cooperation in it.

However, well before Res. 70, and before two rural town chairs were elected as chairs of the county

committees in charge of directing county comprehensive planning, the process was cheating on public participation. It did so through by-passing the 14 state-mandated local comprehensive planning goals, and thereby leading the public on a wild goose chase over a landscape consisting of a non-analytical spew of "visioning" goals for the county comprehensive plan.

Thus, at the present halfway point in the planning calendar, the public has been misled into compiling a wish-list of feel-good goals, with no regard for their relevance to the 14 statutory goals, and with no regard for their practicality, cost or consequences for the county. Therefore, the planning leadership "displaced" by Res. 70 is not going quietly into the night. To the contrary, they are asserting their statutory role to direct the planning, and they aim to rectify the misdirection of the public effort to date.

The prior planning effort, by merely asking the public to "vision" what they want Dane County to "look like" in 20 years or 40 years, etc., did a disservice to the county and to state law. Such "visioning" is a cover for a frankly anti-development and anti-automobile Malthusian agenda by the county's leftist political community. This is the so-called "sustainable development" crowd. Without any scientific proof, they have a kind of secular religious belief in the Malthusian concept, a conceit that has never been proven to apply to the human condition in all of the 200 plus years since Thomas Malthus expounded it in 1798.

The public needs to be asked to "vision" how many jobs it wants the county to have, and to "vision" the taxes or government fees necessary to accomplish the goals of the comprehensive plan, and to "vision" the economic and political effects of destroying the private property tax base of the county and its political units. Comprehensive plans are like matches in the hands of babes, capable of burning down the house of liberty and prosperity. Liberty and prosperity do not coexist with the ecological wilderness that the leftist agenda works to re-establish. All this makes for a sober "Happy New Year" from *Freedom Matters*.

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