

## Privatization is the Future of Regional Planning

Regional plans have basic flaws that prevent successful implementation. In most states, plans have little to no legal force, they can be relatively easily changed, and they must be implemented parcel-by-parcel, project-by-project. Add on top of that, the fact that these plans, whose lifespan could be measured in decades, are supposed to weather political change and roller coaster funding cycles and you can be nearly assured of their failure.

When was the last time you saw a property owner involved in a planning meeting that didn't specifically address them and their property? The public, property owners in particular, have grown apathetic to planning. They know a few years down the road 'something' will change and any decision made today will simply be decided again later.

The lack of certainty and predictability regional plans offer is driving many property owners to find their own solutions. People today are educated and empowered as never before. Anyone with internet access can find and communicate information about issues that affect them. Satellite imagery and simple GIS capabilities are now available to nearly everyone with the ability to push a button.

In suburban Washington, D.C., property owners are forming groups to sell en masse to developers attracted to redevelopment opportunities. Not far from Atlanta, GA property owners created their own land use plan covering over 43,000 acres. Outside of Chicago, farmers pursue specific plans together to ease acquisition of development entitlements. Landowners and land trusts around the country are working in conjunction to protect open space and critical natural habitats and resources privately.

What is bringing these people together? With the recent resurgence of private property rights interests, one would think property owners would hold out for their own self-interest, all others be damned. In the case of land conservation, development, and redevelopment, however, people are realizing that parcel and political lines fragment economic and environmental opportunities. Property owners are working together to increase their properties' value *and* to protect the environment.

This new involvement should be strongly encouraged. The system that discourages property owner participation must be changed. Property owners are in the best position to create, implement, and manage land uses regionally. In many cases, they have lived in their area for generations and witnessed first hand the changes and deeds that made their community what it is.

Planners already provide the tools and information necessary to guide property owners' decision-making. The problem of poor implementation persists because, like dominoes, the decision of one property owner spills over to the next. Though a farmer or rancher may have done the best they could to care for their land, if their neighbor's neighbor place becomes a subdivision, most will throw up their hands and hope to sell for as much as possible. Every landowner I know would like 'to do the right thing', but they do not want to see someone else cash in on their good deeds.

Planners, in both rural and urban communities, need to encourage property owners to work together for conservation, development, and redevelopment. Doing so will lower the costs to government while improving service, ease the burden on already overtaxed planning departments, and improve the quality of our communities as a whole. Increasing the scale of projects beyond the individual parcel level will improve their attractiveness to the financial markets, opening up new sources of capital for conservation and infrastructure development.

If this shift becomes more widespread, the role of planners will evolve into a more formalized liaison between property owner groups and the greater public. Planners will be free to orchestrate large-scale plans and to keep everyone focused on and aware of the big picture. Meanwhile, our increasingly involved citizenry will pick up the day-to-day details specific to their particular project.

We have nearly a century of modern planning experience to learn from, yet urban sprawl is increasing, frustrations are rising, and the taxpayers' burden keeps growing. Whether it is called privatization or not, it is time for a change. The more involved property owners are, the better our communities will be.