



How Conservative Communities Discuss Sustainability

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Conservative communities in the Dallas-Fort Worth area have often opposed sustainable development plans – even when the plans were proposed by local conservative politicians. This kind of impasse can be avoided if planners and local legislators learn to take several key steps: avoid alienating language, tie plans and discussions to local realities, and explain how sustainable planning can further a conservative governing agenda.

The Roots of Tea Party Opposition to Sustainability

Right-wing groups have long been skeptical of discussions about environmental sustainability. In 1992, the United Nations created Agenda 21, a voluntary action plan for sustainable development that encouraged “thinking globally and acting locally.” Conservative groups in the United States have long interpreted Agenda 21 as a global conspiracy to destroy the American way of life. In my research in the Dallas-Fort Worth Area, I observed and spoke with numerous Tea Party members and other conservatives at community planning meetings about sustainable development. My research leads me to conclude that conservative voters are not ideologically opposed to sustainable development, just opposed to how it has been presented.

In the communities of Northern Texas, sustainable development proposals are often perceived as top-down restrictions on profitable endeavors or long-enjoyed activities. People fear that proposals aim to solve problems members of their communities never asked anyone to fix. From this perspective, sustainable behaviors such as bicycling or denser living would only become the norm if they are unduly rewarded, subsidized, or mandated by a patronizing government. Above and beyond such suspicions, planners regularly speak in ways that trigger local fears about outside groups supposedly invested in forcibly changing their community’s way of life. At one community meeting I attended, a planner brought a photo-shopped image of redeveloped streets – which only served to stoke residents’ fears that their single-family homes were slated to be replaced by the mixed-use apartment buildings in the picture.

How Discussions about Sustainability Can be Reframed

Even in the face of popular conservative skepticism, invitations to public engagement on questions of sustainable development should be focused on widely understood problems – especially on the fiscal issues that are important to conservative leaders and voters alike. To citizens wary of government, vague plans to address “community character” sound arbitrary and overreaching. An invitation to “envision” or “plan” is less compelling – and more remote – than an invitation to discuss private investment or local fiscal challenges. Yet such investments and challenges are what sustainability planning is really about in North Texas. Conservative activists would be less angered if local leaders avoid jargon like “context-sensitive solutions,” “compact neighborhoods,” “mixed use,” “complete streets,” and “retail pruning.” Even the word *sustainability* itself can be counterproductive. By contrast, straightforward invitations to discuss widely felt concerns offer a better entry to concrete sustainability issues.

Planners may prefer to think of Agenda 21 conspiracy theorists and other conservatives as obstructionist, but this ignores evidence that skeptical groups also perceive many of the same problems legislators and local officials cite. In a discussion about a proposed storm water management system in a Dallas suburb, word that the system had been used in Kenya triggered accusations of global conspiracy. But at the same time, the accusers agreed that something needed to be done about storm water.

Recommended Approaches

Here three recommendations that may help local leaders sidestep unnecessary opposition to sustainable development plans.

- **Remember that density is market driven.** Market forces drive the creation of high-density developments that allow for more people to live per square mile; and the market in these densely settled areas also drives the development of buildings with a mixture of residences, store fronts, restaurants, and other amenities. In conservative municipalities, planners should emphasize to the public that the market prompts these developments, not planning or zone changes. Conversations about sustainability in North Texas could emphasize how rezoning could expand choices for property owners.
- **Promote a conservative approach to regional infrastructure.** Older, inner suburbs of Dallas with zoning tailored for low-density development are nearing their capacity. At the same time, government spending on new infrastructure encourages suburban sprawl. As green fields are converted into new residential and commercial developments, housing in older suburbs trickles down to lower-income populations and tax burdens increase. If the built-out suburbs of Dallas want reinvestment, they may find it in their interest to discourage further infrastructure expansion into the prairies. Compact, sustainable development could be understood as a more conservative, “fix it first” approach.
- **Avoid jargon and keep the focus local.** Opponents to sustainability efforts in Texas and elsewhere include business and property owners who believe redevelopment favors outsiders at their expense. Unintentionally, planners terrify residents with images of polished streetscapes photo-shopped onto residents’ properties. Instead, planners should tone it down. They should avoid confusing language, make sure the conversation remains local, connect sustainable goals to conservative goals, and focus on ground-up solutions such as business improvement districts.

In all of these ways, planners, legislators, and other officials in conservative communities need to reframe their efforts – to spark the kind of genuine, non-threatening dialogues that could lead to broadly supported, local efforts to improve infrastructure, living arrangements, and business opportunities.

Read more in Andrew H. Whittemore, “Finding Sustainability in Conservative Contexts: Topics for Conversation between American Conservative Elites, Planners, and the Conservative Base.” *Urban Studies* 50, no. 12 (2013): 2460-2477.