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POLITICS

Tea party devotees refocusing

Smart-growth plans become new targets

By James Fisher
The News Journal

The tea party, unable to halt health care reforms or prevent the re-election of the president who championed them, is looking for a new policy dragon to slay – and grass-roots efforts in Delaware and other states are aiming to put “smart growth” in the crosshairs.

Movement adherents in the First State say they intend to make fighting smart-growth measures – land-planning principles that discourage sprawl, with environmental and quality-of-life goals in mind – their top priority, now that President Barack Obama’s re-election makes walking back health care reform impractical.

Such smart-growth strategies, they argue, are aimed at depriving property



Christian Hudson

Refocus: Tea party targets growth issues

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"It's people telling you what rights you have with something you own, free and clear," said Christian Hudson, a Lewes developer and a member of the 9-12 Delaware Patriots, a tea party group that has been focused on the issue for several months.

"If they're trying to say what we can and can't do with our own land, I want to be a part of that discussion," he added.

Their arguments in opposition come with an international twist: Smart growth was praised by a 1992 United Nations initiative called Agenda 21, a term tea party members have made a shorthand name for the disliked initiatives.

The Delaware Patriots' email newsletter has a running "Agenda 21" section, directing readers to online videos and articles on the topic. Since the U.S. Supreme Court's summer ruling on the 2010 Affordable Care Act put it out of reach of conservative reformers, no other issue has so captured the Delaware Patriots' attention.

"Agenda 21 eliminates private property through excessive regulations," a Nov. 21 newsletter warned. "Push back is the only way to protect your rights. . . . We need to be informed and we need to be prepared to stop Agenda 21 in Delaware."

One smart-growth idea is to encourage dense de-

velopment in defined areas and discourage permissive zoning in rural spaces, as a way of preventing sprawl.

In farmer-friendly Sussex County, the notion that dense development is the future faces an especially uphill battle.

"They want to do away with the little bit of control we have on a local level," said Roberta Carol, 76, a Milton retiree who says she is a fervent foe of Agenda 21 policies.

She wants the Sussex County Council to declare it will resist policy initiatives aligned with smart growth.

"We want them to ban it, to bar it from this county," Carol said.

It's a move a few local governments across the country, spurred by vocal conservative protests, have made this year.

In Alabama, pressure from Republican lawmakers led the governor to sign a law in June telling local governments that they can't adopt policies originating from Agenda 21.

In Georgia this month, a briefing by a state senate GOP leader, Chip Rogers, to his Republican caucus on Agenda 21 darkly informed the lawmakers that forced relocations, from suburbs to cities, was part of the plan.

Closer to Delaware, county commissioners in Carroll County, Md., have pruned their comprehensive plan of language that

echoes smart-growth principles.

At least one Delaware lawmaker is thinking along similar lines.

"I definitely have some constituents who have expressed to me, through the campaign cycle, major concerns about growth," said Jeff Spiegelman, a Republican who was elected to the 11th Representative District in November with tea party support.

"A few of my constituents have expressed concern about Agenda 21 by name," he noted.

Speigelman is sympathetic to their concerns about top-down influence on land-use planning.

"People guiding Delaware's growth have to be Delawareans, and that's a big concern about Agenda 21, guidance from outside pressures," said the politician, who will soon start his first term in the state House.

"We should approach every idea with an open mind," he added. "What should not happen is some massive, overriding, one-size-fits-none government solution. Rarely is that ever a good answer."

For smart-growth proponents, seeing their humdrum work on zoning codes and comprehensive plans depicted as serving a nefarious U.N. plot is perplexing.

"These principles have been out for a long time," said Bill McGowan, a University of Delaware pro-

fessor who directs the Coastal Community Enhancement Initiative.

His department, the Institute for Public Administration, held meetings with residents in the Cape Henlopen region of Sussex County and gamed out different scenarios for how the region could grow over several decades. The scenarios suggest development patterns that would solve problems such as traffic congestion on Del. 1.

It's all non-binding, think tank-style stuff.

"We're giving the community a chance to have a discussion over time, to think about what a region should be," McGowan said.

The anti-Agenda 21 crowd sees it differently.

Carol, during an interview at her dining room table, pulled out page after page of literature ascribing ill purposes to the supporters of the environmentally sensitive policies that discourage sprawl and urge lawmakers to make cities and suburbs denser, with more public transportation available.

The policies hold that the environmental costs of less dense development are grave. In the language of the U.N. document adopting it as a non-binding goal in 1992, the goal is to "halt and reverse the effects of environmental degradation" by promoting "sustainable and environmentally

sound development in all countries."

Carol isn't buying it, however.

"It's all tied into the global warming, climate change scheme, why we have to do this," she explained.

"They want to do away with automobile travel, vehicles of every kind. Unsustainable," she scoffed. "Because they're polluting the environment."

Such concerns sound a lot like the "death panels" claims Affordable Care Act opponents harped on: charged language bearing little resemblance to the range of possible outcomes outlined in the reforms.

Nonetheless, anti-Agenda 21 sentiment is already tripping up some local smart-growth initiatives in the First State.

A community meeting held in Lewes this fall to discuss the Cape Henlopen regional planning effort led by UD was disrupted by Delaware Patriots members opposed to the effort on principle.

One of them was Hudson, whose family-owned development company helped build Villages of Five Points, a mixed-use development that includes several smart-growth features, such as residences built over ground-floor commercial space and multifamily housing.

"We built the Villages of Five Points because

people would buy it, not because the government wanted it that way," said Hudson, who describes himself as a strong advocate for private property rights.

When Hudson and his allies filibustered the meeting to a halt, it stymied Ed Lewandowski, a coastal communities development specialist for the Delaware Sea Grant College Program, who has helped lead its regional planning research. The Five Points homeowners association had invited Lewandowski to address its members on the topic in August, he said, after he led several uncontroversial meetings on the subject earlier in the year.

"Somehow word was spread, and we ended up with 60-some people, half of whom were very vocal in opposition to smart growth, or any kind of planning, for that matter," Lewandowski said.

"We didn't get to do the work. It was very frustrating for me, personally," he said.

Land planning, he said, is not a novel idea in America, but a method even the colonists used to build new towns and cities.

"Look at Williamsburg, how it was laid out," Lewandowski said. "Folks put farms where they did for a reason."

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