

Federal bureaucracies want to densify your community

By Randal O'Toole
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Urban planners want to densify your community, and the Obama administration wants to help.

In 2011, the Department of Housing and Urban Development gave the Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG) a \$4.5 million grant to promote so-called “sustainable communities.” DRCOG is using this money to plan high-density developments along the East, Gold and Northwest FasTracks corridors.

This grant is only part of the Obama administration’s efforts to remake America into a European country with dense urban areas, heavily subsidized transit, and strict rules limiting the development of rural areas. Soon after Obama took office in 2009, his secretaries of Transportation and Housing & Urban Development, along with the director of the Environmental Protection Agency, all agreed to create a “partnership” to promote sustainable communities.

“Sustainable communities,” of course, is code for dense communities, and in particular transit-oriented developments (TODs). The Obama administration assumes that people will drive less if they live in apartments within walking distance of shops and offices. This is supposed to “decrease household transportation costs, reduce our nation’s dependence on foreign oil, improve air quality, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and promote public health.”

The fact that there is no evidence that any of this is true hasn’t stopped the federal agencies from pushing this urban planning fad.

The San Francisco Bay Area Metropolitan Transportation Commission received a \$5 million sustainable communities grant. Its plan, completed in 2013, mandates that 80 percent of all new housing and 66 percent of new jobs be located in high-density developments located along the region’s rail lines. Yet the plan itself projects that it will make housing even less affordable than it is today and reduce the region’s greenhouse gas emissions by only about 1 percent.

Even that may be optimistic. Since 1980, the Bay Area has added 200 miles of new rail transit lines, increased the region’s population density by 65 percent, and built scores of

transit-oriented developments. Yet per capita transit ridership has dropped by a third and per capita driving has increased.

Despite the failure of these policies elsewhere, DRCOG was happy to take the money offered by the Obama administration, partly because transit-oriented developments were a part of the FasTracks plan from the very beginning. Rather than build a transit system that meets the needs of people spread out over 775 square miles of land, RTD's plan was to force more people to live in a way that would best serve the rail system it wanted to build.

According to RTD's May 2014 TOD status report, TODs completed to date include more than 27,000 housing units and nearly 24 million square feet of retail and office space. Typically four- and five-stories tall, such mid-rise TODs have sprung up all over the Denver metro area.

One problem with TODs is that Americans overwhelmingly prefer to live in single-family homes. They certainly didn't move to Colorado's wide-open spaces in order to live in a fourth-floor walk-up apartment like the ones found in New York City.

Developers know this, so they want subsidies to build TODs. Most of the projects now being subsidized by the Denver Urban Renewal Authority are TODs. Urban renewal agencies in Denver's suburbs are also focused on TODs.

Urban renewal, which used to be about fixing blighted neighborhoods, is now about densifying neighborhoods. Clearly, planners regard your low-density suburb, even if it was built last year, to be blighted. In fact, a bill being considered by the California legislature redefines "blight" to include all low-density suburbs.

DRCOG, for example, is using the Obama administration's \$4.5 million grant to plan at least three "catalyst projects" that will include housing, shops, restaurants and offices. Planners will zone the areas so tightly that little except the architectural detail will be left to the developers' discretion. The cities in which the projects are located will then have to find the subsidies needed to bribe the developers into building the projects.

Far from being sustainable, TODs mean higher taxes, more traffic congestion, and less affordable housing for the region. Of course, planners think those are good things because they mean you will be less likely to drive and live in single-family homes. This is the future of America as seen by planners from the Obama administration down to your local city government.

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