

Voice For Liberty in Wichita

Individual liberty, limited government, and free markets in Wichita and Kansas

Wichita may choose more centralized planning

by Bob Weeks on April 16, 2012

This Tuesday (April 17th) the [Wichita City Council](#) will consider its participation in the [REAP sustainable communities planning process](#). Wichita ought to reject this expansion of centralized planning, as the outcome will likely serve special interests at the expense of economic growth and jobs for everyone else.

The relevant pages from the agenda packet are available at [REAP Consortium Agreement for South-Central Kansas Sustainable Communities](#).

Who makes the plan? And for whom?

Yes, planning is important. It's likely that several Wichita city council members will use this as a factor in deciding to vote for the sustainable communities planning process. But these members will fail to distinguish between *government plans* and all others.

They will fail to distinguish that when individuals and businesses plan, they are planning for *themselves* and no one else. They are engaging in a *voluntary act*. But when government plans, the plans are drawn for others — whether they want to be in a plan or not, whether they agree with the principles and goals or not.

Furthermore, these members will fail to recognize that when governments plan, [special interest groups soon appropriate the plans to benefit themselves](#). An example is the state's highway plan, with the campaign for increased highway spending funded by the construction industries. They would lobby to build highways to nowhere, as long as they receive contracts for their construction.

The planners themselves are a special interest group, too. They need jobs. Like most government bureaucrats, they “profit” from increasing their power and influence, and by expansion of their budgets and staffs. So when [Sedgwick County Commissioner Jim Skelton](#) asks a professional planner questions about the desirability of planning, what answer does he think he will get? It's not that the planners are not honest people. But they have a vested economic and professional interest in seeing that we have *more government planning*, not less.

And we have evidence that planners watch out for themselves. It is not disputed that this planning grant benefits [Regional Economic Area Partnership \(REAP\)](#). [Sedgwick County Commissioner Richard Ranzau](#) says that John Schlegel, Wichita's Director of Planning, told him that "acceptance of this grant will take REAP to another level, because right now they are struggling, and this will help plot the course for REAP." He said that REAP, which is housed at the Hugo Wall School of Public Affairs at Wichita State University, needs to expand its role and authority in order to give it "something to do."

So we see that REAP is another special interest group seeking to benefit itself. In this case, our best hope is that REAP engages in merely make-work, that the plan it produces is put on a shelf and ignored, and that the only harm to us is the \$1.5 million cost of the plan.

The knowledge problem

There's also the problem of the knowledge needed to plan. This is enough of a problem when individuals and businesses plan for themselves. It's a tremendous — and unsolvable — problem when trying to plan for an entire region, even one as small as downtown Wichita. [Arnold King](#) has written about the ability of government experts to decide what investments should be made with public funds. [There's a problem with knowledge and power:](#)

As Hayek pointed out, knowledge that is important in the economy is dispersed. Consumers understand their own wants and business managers understand their technological opportunities and constraints to a greater degree than they can articulate and to a far greater degree than experts can understand and absorb.

When knowledge is dispersed but power is concentrated, I call this the knowledge-power discrepancy. Such discrepancies can arise in large firms, where CEOs can fail to appreciate the significance of what is known by some of their subordinates. ... *With government experts, the knowledge-power discrepancy is particularly acute.*

Another favorite thought from Friedrich Hayek is in his book *The Fatal Conceit*: "The curious task of economics is to demonstrate to men how little they really know about what they imagine they can design." But they will try.

REAP has much information about the process on its website devoted to the grant, located at [Sustainable Communities Grant 2011](#). I would especially encourage reading the document "Sustainable Communities Work Plan DRAFT." In there you can learn of the plans to "decrease per capita Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT)." This plan, if it succeeds, will harm citizens' mobility and economic opportunities, especially for the people who need jobs most.

[Cato Institute Senior Fellow Randal O'Toole](#), author of [The Best-Laid Plans: How Government Planning Harms Your Quality of Life, Your Pocketbook, and Your Future](#), writes the following regarding the tremendous boost the personal automobile has given

Americans: “Since the dawn of the Republic, no invention has enhanced the quality of life of the average American as much as the mass-produced automobile. Americans today are far more mobile, they earn much higher incomes, and they have access to far more consumer goods than a hundred years ago. It is no exaggeration to attribute most of these improvements to the wide availability of automobiles.”

Remember, the sustainable communities planning process is definitely anti-automobile. One of the goals for the plan is: “Regional Transportation Plan: Develop multi-modal transportation options/programs for the region and connects housing options to emerging employment clusters.” This sounds like a good and noble idea. But in practice, government transit systems fail to produce what riders truly need, and are very expensive. The last time I checked, only 22.5 percent of the costs of running the Wichita transit system is paid for by riders through the fare box. Taxpayers — most of whom don’t ride the buses — pay the rest.

But owning an automobile gives people mobility, and that is very important for workers. Some examples:

“Studies show that car ownership is a significant factor in improving the employment status of welfare recipients.” ([Job Access, Commute, and Travel Burden Among Welfare Recipients](#))

“Raphael and Rice (2002) found in their study that car ownership has a strong effect on the probability of an individual being employed as well as on the number of hours they work per week. Generally, car ownership better enables job seekers to look for jobs. They can consider work outside of regular transit service hours, and they can travel faster, more safely, and more flexibly than with public transportation.” ([Transportation & Work: Exploring Car Usage and Employment Outcomes in the LSAL Data](#))

Also from this study: “Overall, car ownership does appear to have an important relationship to employment status, wages, and weeks worked.” And “Having a car as a primary mode of transportation makes a respondent four times as likely to be employed. Car ownership also improves earnings by several hundred dollars and increases weeks worked by up to eleven weeks.”

In the rankings of factors that are important to obtaining employment, a car was more useful than a high-school-equivalent diploma. We should be working to increase automobile ownership, especially among lower-income people. The planning process Wichita is considering adopting, with its emphasis on government transit rather than private automobiles, will decrease mobility and economic opportunity for everyone.

Finally, consider this from O’Toole on how the planning process ignores reality: “Transit advocates will point out that the autos driving on congested urban highways often have only one occupant. But that is exactly the point: If modern life is so decentralized that carpooling makes no sense for most commuters, how are giant buses and high-capacity

trains going to work?” Fortunately, I don’t think high-capacity trains are seriously considered for the Wichita area. But the planners want more government transit and less private automobiles, despite our decentralized lifestyle.

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Last week [Wendell Cox](#) appeared on an [episode of the Jason Lewis radio program](#) and talked about sustainable communities, etc. Sedgwick County and Wichita were mentioned. His recent piece in the Wall Street Journal is [California Declares War on Suburbia: Planners want to herd millions into densely packed urban corridors. It won’t save the planet but will make traffic even worse.](#)