

Sustainability strengthens our communities

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(19 March 2012)

By Patrick Henry Hays

As I finish my 24th year as mayor of my hometown, North Little Rock, Ark., I often reflect on my guiding principles. I believe in the U.S. Constitution, which I have sworn to uphold, and I have deep respect for those who have sacrificed to give us the best form of government on earth. As an elected official, I am tasked with maintaining my community's way of life and increasing our prosperity.

That's why it is difficult for me to comprehend the message sent last Thursday by the Tennessee House of Representatives to local elected officials: Do not attract new business investment by making your community a great place to live. Do not pursue economic opportunity that also benefits the environment. And by no means should you plan ahead for what kind of community you want to leave your children and grandchildren.



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How did they manage to do all this? By passing a resolution "condemning" sustainability and a 20-year-old United Nations blueprint called Agenda 21, deeming it all part of a vast conspiracy at work in America's local governments.

Thousands of mayors and county leaders nationwide understand the plain truth about sustainability. To be sustainable is to balance economic, environmental and social concerns, and to think about how our actions today will affect future generations. In practice, it is about helping our communities save energy and money, create more transportation choices, preserve clean air and bring economic prosperity in the process. For example, in North Little Rock we have improved our parks, added a streetcar system and retained or created new jobs through partnerships with the corporations L'Oreal and Caterpillar. That's sustainability at work.

I am a mayor who believes local governments should have the freedom and local control to pursue these solutions as they see fit. Agenda 21 is not a threat to those freedoms. Agenda 21 is an outline of voluntary choices for how all levels of government can become more sustainable, and it is not being forced on anyone, anywhere. It was negotiated by national government representatives from around the world in 1992, with input from local governments. I admire many of this document's aims, but while it has inspired communities overseas to take action, it has little connection to the sustainability work of U.S. cities and counties.

Unfortunately, those who embrace conspiracy theories about sustainability are now attempting to restrict freedoms of local governments. A separate bill, HB 3571, attempts not just to “condemn” sustainability, but to ban it outright in Tennessee, and ban local governments from joining ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability USA, the nonprofit membership association that I lead as president and board chairman. A law to take away local governments’ freedom to join a nonprofit is un-American. ICLEI proudly supports the self-defined local goals of its 550 U.S. city and county members.

A review of the anti-sustainability bill by the Tennessee Fiscal Office of the Legislature found that its effects would be catastrophic for Tennessee: loss of federal funding and state and local revenue; the invalidation of existing state air- and water-protection laws. Fortunately, the bill has not yet progressed beyond committee. Hopefully, someone has realized outlawing common-sense sustainability makes no sense at all.

Having served in the Arkansas Legislature, I might take offense if someone from another state criticized me. My intention is only to provide a balanced perspective for decision-makers in Tennessee. Additional light on a path never hurts the traveler in choosing the best way to go.

Patrick Henry Hays is mayor of North Little Rock, Ark., and president and board chairman of ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability USA (ICLEI USA).