

THE SUNDAY DENVER POST

Voice of the Rocky Mountain Empire

February 21, 1999



o Denver

Unlivable communities

By Daniel R. Simmons

Vice President Al Gore recently announced a new "livable communities agenda," designed to "ensure a high quality of life" by controlling so-called "urban sprawl." But rather than making our communities more livable for everyone, this scheme will make life less livable for the poor and middle class, assuring that life remains livable only for the well-to-do.

The vice president's agenda calls for providing \$9.5 billion in bonding authority to local and state governments for land acquisition, \$6.1 billion in federal subsidies for mass transit, and millions more for regional planning bodies. A day after the vice president's announcement, the president pledged that he would recommend spending another \$600 million for federal land acquisitions. This agenda promotes taking land-use decisions out of the hands of local communities and transferring it to more distant, and less accountable, regional and federal bureaucracies. These distant planners then will limit our choices for housing and transportation to achieve what they deem best for everyone else.

With today's strong economy, more and more people are realizing the American dream of homeownership. Families build homes in the suburbs because the suburbs offer opportunities that cities do not. Better schools, personal open space in the form of yards, and auto-friendly infrastructure that allows people the freedom to meet their needs with the greatest ease and flexibility are available in the suburbs. Besides these factors pulling people to the suburbs, other factors push them out of the cities. Failed social policies and utopian city planners made inner cities unlivable, and now these planners want to do for the suburbs what they did for the inner cities by instituting federal land-use planning and empowering new bureaucracies that stifle opportunity, freedom and innovation.

The Clinton-Gore administration's



GUEST COMMENTARY

plans for land acquisition will threaten the American dream of homeownership by reducing the supply of land for housing. This decrease will drive up land prices and make homeownership an impossible dream for many low and middle-income families. This consequence of land acquisitions may not be unintended, but merely a calculated move by the utopian planners to restrict these families to inner-city apartments and high-density development. By making homeownership in the suburbs prohibitively expensive for poor and middle-income families, new development will not interfere with the political elite's views of open space.

The vice president touts his plan as simply providing federal money and financing to help state and local governments plan better. While this scheme may sound innocuous, it comes with dangerous federal strings attached. In this plan, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will control whether federal bonds and grants get approved, thereby giving the EPA control of local land-use issues. Federal involvement in local issues runs contrary to the public's wishes. In one recent poll, 67 percent of respondents said that where sprawl is a concern, local and state governments should address it. Only 8 percent said the federal government should take the lead on this issue.

Public opposition isn't the only problem here. The EPA has a track record of expensive, inefficient regulations that fail to consider the trade-offs inherent in real life. The EPA's command and control, one-size-fits-all regulations may work on paper, but practical application is much messier and requires the time- and place-specific information that federal bureau-

crats inevitably lack. For example, the EPA, through the Safe Drinking Water Act, denies extending federal funds to communities without piped water. This restriction endangers the public since most serious water quality problems occur when people drink untreated water from non-public systems. The rural poor suffer most, because poor communities often lack piped water.

Regional governance creates regional bureaucracies to plan for several communities. Regionalization shifts control from local, accountable officials to less accountable planners who centrally plan many communities at once.

The second tenet, dense development, is not bad in and of itself. Cities should allow dense development. The problem occurs when governing bodies force densely populated developments on communities. Government should give families the opportunity to choose the type of housing that best fits their needs, not force people to live in densely populated areas merely to meet some planning goal.

As for the third tenet, mass transit, smart growth's goals focus on promoting inefficient mass transit that the public doesn't want and often doesn't use. Light rail, smart growth's darling, costs millions of dollars per mile, is forever reliant on subsidies for its operation, and does not even carry the capacity of a single lane of highway. To end such waste, the government should privatize mass transit and deregulate operation of private jitneys and minibuses, enabling the market to meet demands.

The Clinton-Gore plan will make the suburbs more livable for the elite. But for the rest of us, it reduces choices for housing and transportation. This plan reduces the power of locals to control their land. Command-and-control central planning of the suburbs will not improve the livability of the suburbs, but it will reduce our freedom.

Daniel R. Simmons is an environmental research assistant at the Competitive Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C.

crats inevitably lack. For example, the EPA, through the Safe Drinking Water Act, denies extending federal funds to communities without piped water. This restriction endangers the public since most serious water quality problems occur when people drink untreated water from non-public systems. The rural poor suffer most, because poor communities often lack piped water.

Regional governance creates regional bureaucracies to plan for several communities. Regionalization shifts control from local, accountable officials to less accountable planners who centrally plan many communities at once.

The second tenet, dense development, is not bad in and of itself. Cities should allow dense development. The problem occurs when governing bodies force densely populated developments on communities. Government should give families the opportunity to choose the type of housing that best fits their needs, not force people to live in densely populated areas merely to meet some planning goal.

As for the third tenet, mass transit, smart growth's goals focus on promoting inefficient mass transit that the public doesn't want and often doesn't use. Light rail, smart growth's darling, costs millions of dollars per mile, is forever reliant on subsidies for its operation, and does not even carry the capacity of a single lane of highway. To end such waste, the government should privatize mass transit and deregulate operation of private jitneys and minibuses, enabling the market to meet demands.

The Clinton-Gore plan will make the suburbs more livable for the elite. But for the rest of us, it reduces choices for housing and transportation. This plan reduces the power of locals to control their land. Command-and-control central planning of the suburbs will not improve the livability of the suburbs, but it will reduce our freedom.

Daniel R. Simmons is an environmental research assistant at the Competitive Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C.