Sustainable Safe Communities: An International Conspiracy?

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Who would believe such a thing! The title of this paper was inspired by a local group in Cherokee County, North Carolina that tried to have the County Commission eliminate funding for a regional planning council. The basis for this request? The group charged that regional planning and sustainability is being guided by Agenda 21, the United Nations’ plan for sustainable development, and that it will result in approval of land development regulations and taking of private property. In other words, they didn’t want anyone, especially the government, to tell them what to do with their property.

I would not have taken this so seriously if it had just been here. I live in a very rural area of western North Carolina where land development regulations and planning are nasty, if not un-American, words. But when I read an article about two candidates for Congress who both stated at a rally that Agenda 21 was real and a threat, I realized it is time to share my views on sustainable growth.

As a bit of background, my wife (who is also my business partner) and I developed a model for sustainable development while I was working for the city of Sarasota, Florida. I was a police captain and Sherry was the chief planner for the City Planning Department. What started us on this path was the North Trail Sector Study, part of an update to the city of Sarasota’s comprehensive plan started in 1990 and culminating with the adoption of the North Trail Ordinance in September 1992. Through the sector study, we found a means of bringing diverse groups together to achieve a long-lasting positive change in our community. The vehicle for this change was Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED).

Human behavior in relationship to the built environment can be traced back thousands of years. In its modern form, discussions started with Jane Jacobs and her book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Ms. Jacobs described the physical conditions that led to safe or unsafe streets and neighborhoods and problems associated with how we plan and design communities. We are still making some of those same mistakes 50 years later. And as a lifelong conservative, I am not afraid to admit that sustainability and smart growth are two of the most important attributes for our future.

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1 This was one of the first times CPTED-specific language was included in municipal land development regulations. Details of the planning process and inclusion of CPTED strategies may be found in Sherry Plaster and Stan Carter, *Planning for Prevention: Sarasota Florida’s Approach to Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design*, State of Florida Criminal Justice Executive Institute, 1993, available at [www.CCCPTED.com](http://www.CCCPTED.com).
We did not design our model from scratch. It grew organically as the planning process unfolded. The departments within our city followed their own agendas. If you asked, you would receive cooperation, but it was not a routine occurrence. Police and fire services were the most removed from and least involved in urban planning and development review. However, crime and fear of crime were significant factors identified in the North Trail sector study and the Planning Department requested the Police Department’s assistance. Ultimately, a five-member team was formed, including two policemen, two planners, and one building official. CPTED maintains that “the proper design and effective use of the built environment can lead to a reduction in the fear of crime and the incidence of crime, and to an improvement in the quality of life.”² Along with the police principles of surveillance, access, and territoriality, CPTED provided a common language for the design of some problem-solving strategies.

During the North Trail study, we learned that law enforcement services were not as responsive to citizen concerns as we had believed. Police services had focused on major crimes, large-scale narcotic issues, and responding to service demands. Now the Police Department became immersed in the planning process, which forced us to conduct a methodical review of physical resources, including characteristics of the built environment, and attend numerous public input meetings as guests of the Planning Department. We found that fear of major crime (where little actually occurred) and observation of lesser crimes (prostitution and drug dealing) were major issues for our citizens. As a result, we instituted new responses, which led to increased public support for longer-range planning efforts.³

From 1991 through 1996, using what we learned during the sector study, we applied similar techniques in our downtown redevelopment and in two nearby neighborhoods, all with positive results. The process involved removing crack houses from the neighborhoods.

The Police Department was tasked with investigating and arresting those responsible for illegal activities. The properties were often in substandard condition and were acquired by the city. The structures were then demolished and the lots made available to a nonprofit that constructed a new single-family dwelling designed by architects fluent in CPTED principles. Local banks assisted with funding, converting problem rental properties into properties for first-time homebuyers. With each sale, the city was reimbursed for the lot value, acquisition, and demolition costs. The reimbursed funds were then used to acquire another property. Once several structures were rehabilitated, other property owners began making improvements. We found that the focused reduction of crime problems, coupled with long-term government and private-sector investment, were key elements in revitalization.

²National Crime Prevention Institute, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky.
Another evolution was adding members of the police and fire departments to the city development review process and requiring applicants for development permits to address CPTED. Again, CPTED provided a common language and skill set that facilitated a dialog about design and the environment, including how the environment was to be used. City staff became aware of police and fire issues, while police and fire department members were introduced to issues that the planning, engineering, building, and public works departments were facing. The result was a twice-a-month opportunity to review the applications, discuss what problems were occurring, and identify potential solutions.

In early 1993, I was in command of our Uniform Patrol Division. I had a particular problem with a neighborhood bar that was hosting a popular band two nights a week. People were coming from over 50 miles away. While the bar owner was diligent about following all regulations, the spillover into the public realm was very problematic. During a Development Review Committee meeting, I was discussing the problem with several team members. The city engineering representative noted that he had just finalized a contract to replace the sanitary sewer and potable water lines along a ten-block segment that included the street in front of the bar. I asked when the project would start and learned the dates had not been set and start location did not matter. A neighborhood planner working on strategies in the city’s 50-year vision plan indicated what planning efforts were taking place in nearby neighborhoods.

Informal discussions among city staff members continued, which led to a formal action plan that included the following elements:

1. The Police Department would dedicate resources in a concentrated effort to reduce crime and increase public perceptions of safety in the neighborhood. With the activity adjacent to the bar as one of the more visible issues, it became a high priority for action. The enforcement actions would conclude when the engineering project reached the section of street in front of the bar.
2. The Chief of Police would assist in organizing both a business group and a neighborhood advisory group for the designated area.
3. The Planning Department would facilitate the local business/neighborhood public input and make recommendations for change.
4. The Public Works Department would coordinate new landscaping along the corridor after the sewer/water project was completed.
5. The Community Development Department would assist with storefront improvements.

An intensive law enforcement effort began three weeks before the sewer/water project reached the street in front of the bar. Criminal activity and nuisance behavior was dramatically reduced before the bar had to close due to construction. During this three-week period, the police and
planning departments worked with businesses and neighbors to rename the community and develop a long-range plan for improvements. Local businesses began improving their storefronts using grants from the Community Development Department and a CPTED grant from the Police Department. Assisted by a county street tree program, Public Works planned landscaping improvements for the area. A local builder pledged to rehabilitate several problem properties adjacent to the main corridor. Another local businessman provided space for moving the Community Oriented Policing substation out of a nearby public housing unit to the main corridor. He also donated space and was a key supporter of a new charter school for the neighborhood. Three weeks later, the bar reopened and the problems never reappeared. Crime and law enforcement calls for service were dramatically reduced and after 16 years, the area continues to improve.

What we learned from this experience is that it is absolutely imperative for government departments to regularly communicate with one another and participate in mutual problem-solving. Good ideas can come from anywhere and you should be open to seizing opportunities that suddenly appear. There is unbelievable power available to any city or county willing to let go of internal rivalry, break through silos, and develop lateral communications processes. We found that private-sector involvement increased when government was the impetus for positive community change. We also found that a coordinated response to complex problems saved both time and money.

In our training and consulting work, we have had the opportunity to see many positive efforts across the nation. The most successful projects are multi-disciplinary. They involve both public- and private-sector professionals who have different goals, skill sets, and ways of communicating ideas. We have found CPTED to be a powerful tool for facilitating discussions that find common ground among a wide variety of participants.

We have found it difficult to consistently reach decision-makers and practitioners in each discipline CPTED touches. Each one has different educational requirements, support organizations, and work requirements, and all of these limit the time and opportunity to seek information outside the discipline. Yet, when planners, engineers, or architects find that their work can reduce crime and fear of crime, they have opened that magic door to new-found opportunities.

There are several challenges for the future of CPTED in sustainable smart growth. We need to develop consistent terms that all disciplines may use. We need to find a means to collect and publish positive examples of public- and private-sector efforts in sustainable development or redevelopment. We need to encourage people who have been on the sidelines to get back in the game. Lastly, we need to keep sending the message that moving forward is everyone’s responsibility. There are several ways to reach the same goal, but a civil dialog among all interested participants is the best way to get there.

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