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The Ugly Side of the Pursuit for ‘Sustainability’

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Los Angeles County has adopted a “sustainability” program that officials expect “to enhance the well-being of every community in the county while reducing damage to the natural environment and adapting to the changing climate.” This is considered smart. By people who should know better.

Our smartest should know central planning has never worked and never will. Yet the project has been met with gushing approval. It’s “bold,” “ambitious,” “progressive,” “forward thinking,” and a “model” for other big cities.

The program, called “OurCounty,” has 12 goals, 37 strategies, and 159 “actions.” Among the dozen objectives, overflowing with green buzzwords, are a “fossil fuel-free L.A. County,” “resilient and healthy community environments,” “equitable and sustainable land use,” “thriving ecosystems, habitats, and biodiversity,” the “sustainable production and consumption of resources,” and, to advance the state’s road diet agenda, “a convenient, safe, clean, and affordable transportation system that enhances mobility and quality of life while reducing car dependency.”

The plan also includes, says Sean Hecht, co-executive director of UCLA’s Emmett Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, a plan consultant, “economic sustainability, with the broader goal of equity,” because no green deal, new or otherwise, would be complete without plans for the political management of the economy. Nor would it exclude the politics dictated by social justice organizations, such as the Liberty Hill Foundation, which believes “inequality is engineered, not inevitable” and calls Los Angeles the “the nation’s wage theft capital.” According to UCLA’s Institute

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of the Environment and Sustainability, that group played a “key” role in the OurCounty project.

For the county to achieve its goals, officials will have to take a deep dive into central planning. How else will they be able to organize a community in which, according to Curbed Los Angeles, “oil derricks and refineries would disappear from the region. Gas stations would become irrelevant,” and “streetscapes would be dominated by electric vehicles, cyclists, and pedestrians”?

The planners themselves admit that OurCounty is a “comprehensive” endeavor on a “scale has never been tried.”

Well, maybe it’s never been tried if we leave out the many failed 20th century attempts to order entire nations in Eastern Europe around an “enlightened” ideology promising a prosperous and egalitarian utopia.

This is not to say the Los Angeles planners are socialists but is said merely to point out the defects, as well as the inherent coercion, in trying to use government as an organizing tool.

The attraction of central planning “seems, at first sight, so reasonable that it is hard to see why any intelligent person would oppose it,” the late theologian and author David Elton Trueblood once wrote, because “every intelligent person engages in planning. A thoughtful man plans his day, his week, his year, his life work.”

Yet, “planning for another involves factors which are totally absent in planning for one’s self.” Multiply that single “another” by millions and it’s easy to see where the problems begin, whether the goal is to establish a single-payer health care regime in California or a plan to create a “sustainable” community in a metropolis that makes up more than a quarter of the state’s population.

Central planning’s greatest flaw is its uninformed, top-down impositions. This is the exact opposite of how markets work: *There*, information is generat-

ed at the bottom and sent upward. Top-down decisions are “requirements for action or restraint, not efforts at finding voluntary agreement,” explains Cato Institute scholar Chris Edwards.

In other words, when a government agency such as OurCounty operates a program, decisions are based on speculation. Planners must guess because they have no information to rely on, only commands from the top, which distort human behavior.

Not only is central planning unable to deliver its intended results, it is by nature coercive.

“No individual or organization,” a Kentucky businessman wrote more than 50 years ago, “can plan unless control is exercised over the means required to achieve the chosen goal.” And the grander the scheme, the more planners need coercion and “authoritarian” actions to reach their bureaucratic targets, increasing the likelihood of failure because the responses to coercion and authoritarianism are evasion and noncompliance.

Central planning also invites corruption.

“How are the planners to be chosen?” author and political theorist Russell Kirk once asked, “and who will guarantee their integrity? And who will compensate for their errors?”

Furthermore, the purpose of central planning has never been to produce more wealth. Its aim is “to redistribute wealth already produced, according to the whims of a central authority.” (No further explanation is needed to show why a social justice organization would play a “key” role in Los Angeles plan.)

The manipulation of economic affairs and the demanded submission of private citizens for we-know-best vanity projects should never be tolerated in a free society. Leave central planning where it belongs, the subject of a history lesson reminding us of the mistakes we don’t need to repeat.