

The Actions of Discontent

Tea Party and Property Rights Activists Pushing Back Against Regional Planning

Karen Trapenberg Frick

Problem, research strategy, and findings:

The Tea Party's effects on local and regional planning efforts, given the movement's fierce support of property rights and equally fierce opposition to sustainability goals in regional planning efforts, have received little study. I wanted to understand how Tea Party and fellow property rights advocates became involved in regional planning efforts in the San Francisco Bay Area and Atlanta, GA, and how planners perceived and dealt with their objections and tactics. Interactions between the two groups were marked by philosophical differences over the role of government and the necessity and value of regional planning. However, these actors were also deeply divided on plan content and the authenticity of the public outreach process. Tea Party and property rights activists were not the only ones with substantive and procedural concerns about regional planning efforts; tactical coalitions of unexpected allies emerged, aligning on plan viability, finance methods and funding, project costs, impacts, and process. My research shows that common ground can be negotiated between opposing groups on matters of content and process. The concerns of the various stakeholders involved parallel questions often addressed by scholarly planning research, providing evidence of continuing challenges and flaws in planning.

Takeaway for practice: The planning community should not dismiss the opposition of Tea Party and property rights advocates; these activists could catalyze new coalitions of opponents if planners do not attend to the substantive and procedural concerns of participants.

Keywords: Agenda 21, property rights, regional planning, sustainability, Tea Party

The Tea Party's explosive arrival on the U.S. scene and its role in national politics after President Barack Obama's election in 2008 has been well researched (e.g., Rosenthal & Trost, 2012). Less studied is the fierce opposition mounted by Tea Party and property rights activists against city and regional planning efforts. Planning opponents often invoke United Nations Agenda 21, which they view as a smokescreen for achieving a U.N.-led one-world government. The chief villains behind this perceived insidious plot are the APA and ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability, a nonprofit organization that assists cities with climate action planning (e.g., Americans Against Agenda 21, n.d.; American Policy Center, n.d.; Koire, 2011).

Regional agencies come under special attack because they are governed by unelected and, opponents argue, unaccountable boards; they are considered a threat to the autonomy of local governments and their land use authority (Koire, 2011). Tea Party and related activists question the costs and value of policies to reduce carbon emissions because of deep-rooted skepticism about climate change claims. Their opposition is grounded in the conviction that planners use methods that force or coerce members of the public to unwittingly endorse a predetermined outcome, such as a sustainability plan or particular projects (Koire, 2011; Whittemore, 2013).

I conducted two case studies of Tea Party and property rights opposition to regional transportation planning efforts. In this study, I focus on how each side framed the issues and developed their tactics in the resulting conflicts and I evaluate the extent to which planners changed their plans or processes, or are likely to do so, in response to future opposition.

I find that the regional processes in each site are marked by deep philosophical differences between activists and planning proponents on plan content and process as well as the role of government. However, some claims by conservative opponents overlap with those of progressive groups like the Sierra Club. As a result, unanticipated tactical coalitions of strange bedfellows emerged, thereby demonstrating flaws in both plan content and the regional planning process. One could cynically assert that claims and coalition-building efforts

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were disingenuous, and that Tea Party and property rights activists would block plans under any circumstance. However, their claims and actions are less easily dismissed because they were shared with others on the left and are consistent with other scholarly research that questions the equity of some financing measures and the effectiveness of some planned transportation projects and strategies. I recommend that cities, regions, and activists, both reticent and supportive of planning, jointly develop plan impact assessments that identify the public service burdens and implications for the property rights of proposed plans and projects.

Background

The Politics of Discontent

Many theorists suggest that planners should be more attuned to those who are uneasy or in opposition to urban growth management and smart growth policies. Dierwechter (2008) recommends increased case study research on the politics of discontent. Throgmorton (2013) and Marcuse (2010) recommend that planning scholars make efforts to acknowledge Tea Party feelings of fear and anger as legitimate; they argue that the planning community should create space for these perspectives. Whittemore (2013) similarly argues for reframing sustainability topics to dovetail with conservative views to foster dialog between conservative actors and planners, which could include, for example, discussing how public subsidies typically support

the infrastructure costs of low-density development, zoning often restricts more efficient higher densities and mixed uses, and current planning and environmental processes need improvement. Given the novelty of Tea Party opposition, however, there is scant planning scholarship. This study responds to these calls by presenting empirical research on the movement's interface with planning. There are two primary research questions: how Tea Party and property rights activists view regional planning goals, efforts, processes, and plans; and how planners and other proponents view and respond to the process and their opponents. To address these questions, I undertake a comparative analysis of regional planning efforts in two regions where Tea Party and property rights activists play a major role in intense public debates.

Research Approach

The two cases focus on regional transport megaplanning¹ in 1) the San Francisco Bay Area's regional transportation and land use planning effort to develop a 9-county, long-range sustainable communities strategies plan required under state law to reduce greenhouse gas emissions; and 2) the Atlanta region's recent state-mandated referendum to fund transport infrastructure through a proposed 10-county sales tax increase. Tea Party members and property rights advocates voiced strong opposition in both cases.

The focus on regional transport planning and infrastructure allows for greater comparison across similar institutional frameworks and practices. Table 1 shows key

Table 1. Key characteristics of Atlanta and San Francisco Bay Area regions.

Characteristic	Atlanta region	San Francisco Bay Area
Lead regional agency	Atlanta Regional Commission	Metropolitan Transportation Commission, Association of Bay Area Governments
Number of public agencies	10 counties, 68 cities, 5 transit agencies	9 counties, 101 cities, 24 transit agencies, 2 additional regional agencies
Dollars at stake	\$8.5 billion to be raised through 1% sales tax in 10-county region over 10 years	\$292 billion in future transport funds estimated available from a variety of sources through 2040
Current status of proposal	Sales tax failed by 63% on July 31, 2012	Adopted July 2013; four lawsuits pending
Proposal name	Widely labeled as "T-SPLOST" (Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax)	Plan Bay Area and One Bay Area
State statute	Transportation Investment Act of 2010, Georgia House Bill 277	The Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006, California Assembly Bill 32; Senate Bill 375 of 2008
Current population estimate	4 million	7 million
Projected population estimate in the next 30 years	6 million	9 million
Square miles	3,000	6,900

Sources: U.S. Census, Atlanta Regional Commission (2011a, 2011b, 2011c), Association of Bay Area Governments and Metropolitan Transportation Commission (2013a, 2013b), www.metroatlantatransportationvote.com.

details of the two case study areas in terms of the regional context, organizational structure, and planning effort. In both the Bay Area and Atlanta, regional agencies are responding to recent state legislation. Like other regions, these bodies must negotiate and manage the tensions between numerous public agencies and interests, including between older core cities and newer suburban cities. However, these two areas differ in political and social contexts, with the Bay Area having a stronger liberal base and Atlanta a more conservative base, thereby enhancing case comparison.

To develop the two cases, I gathered evidence through detailed review of key documents and online sources of public agency, activist, and other stakeholders, including websites, blogs, and social media. For the Bay Area case, I observed several heated public and citizen-organized meetings with 100 to 350 local residents in attendance. For Atlanta, I attended a Tea Party group meeting and spoke briefly about the research effort. To aid in assessing primary texts and field observations, I conducted a total of 24 in-depth semistructured interviews with key actors selected because of their direct and high level of involvement with or close observation of the Bay Area or Atlanta case, and included citizens affiliated with Tea Party and property rights groups; representatives of environmental, social justice, and planning advocacy groups; planners; and elected officials. The interviews lasted on average one to two hours, with some interviews lasting three hours. All interviewees were asked similar questions that focused on how respondents viewed the regional plan and process and how they responded and organized in support or opposition. Activists also were asked how they learned about the plan, became motivated to participate, and whether they had previously participated in planning processes. To interpret the interviews, I looked for patterns in responses, which I triangulated against published and online sources and, for the Bay Area, meeting observation.

The generalizability of the case studies is limited, but participant views, responses, and interactions are transferable for introspection and future research at other geographic scales, areas, planning scopes, and sectors.

Tea Party and Property Rights Views in Brief

Within a planning context, tensions emerge between actors based on their worldviews about the pursuit of individual versus collective good in the present and future as well as conceptions of land use authority and private property rights (Myers, 2007). With sustainability and

smart growth planning, for example, proponents often frame efforts as a call to action for changes in development patterns and individual behaviors that would benefit the public good, such as land preservation and the environment (Chapin, 2012). In these cases, and more generally, heated opposition results when planning actions are perceived to restrict individual rights because they are seen as threatening the market value of the land or people's expectations on how they can develop their property (Dear, 1992; Dierwechter, 2008; Hartmann & Needham, 2013; Jacobs, 2004; Jacobs & Paulsen, 2009; Tarlock, 2013). Regional planning is of dire concern when viewed as a major threat to local governments' autonomy and primacy in making land use decisions and perceived as a means to redistribute wealth from residents of suburban areas to central cities (e.g., Kurtz, 2012; Seltzer & Carbonell, 2011).

The Tea Party has a broader message than the property rights movement that gained traction in recent years (e.g., Foley, 2012; Jacobs, 2012; Rosenthal & Trost, 2012; Skocpol & Williamson, 2011). Tea Party affiliates concerned with local or regional planning monitor and actively engage to maintain property rights and resist planning efforts that some connect to Agenda 21 (Whittemore, 2013). Jacobs (2010, 2012) speculates that private property rights discourse and advocacy will continue to feature prominently on the public agenda, whether through the Tea Party and property rights movements or future similar manifestations. Thus, the ideological divide and resultant conflict over planning may endure, and the Bay Area and Atlanta cases provide evidence of its current formation at the regional level.

Bay Area Boiling

The Bay Area's regional planning agencies (i.e., the Metropolitan Transportation Commission [MTC] and Association of Bay Area Governments [ABAG]) are charged with developing a long-range plan to guide transportation funding investment, land use, and affordable housing. State legislation, Senate Bill 375 of 2008, mandates plan development to partially implement the state's greenhouse gas reduction mandate (Barbour & Deakin, 2012). The plan's initial framework was rolled out in 2010. Under the plan, future development to accommodate projected population growth would be targeted to Priority Development Areas (PDAs), which, by definition, would be fairly compact, mixed-use areas adjacent to transit and include affordable housing. Restricted growth areas, or Priority Conservation Areas, also are identified

(Association of Bay Area Governments and Metropolitan Transportation Commission [ABAG/MTC], 2013b).

The regional agencies discussed the plan at over 250 public meetings, including 37 public workshops or hearings from 2011 to summer 2013. They conducted three telephone polls and 22 additional focus group meetings with low-income residents (ABAG/MTC, 2013b). Hundreds of attendees packed the public workshops and key meetings, in stark contrast to meetings conducted in conjunction with previous plans as noted by planners I interviewed.

The final Plan Bay Area was adopted in July 2013. The plan designates how \$292 billion in available transport funds will be distributed through 2040. Approximately \$14 billion in funding is specifically set aside to support a new One Bay Area Grant (OBAG) program; between half and three-quarters of this funding is targeted to projects within priority development areas (ABAG/MTC, 2013b). Four lawsuits were filed between August and October 2013 against the plan representing plaintiffs across the political spectrum: two from organizations affiliated in part with Tea Party and property rights groups and individuals; one from environmental groups, including the Sierra Club; and another from the Bay Area Building Industry Coalition, an industry lobby. All charge that the plan violates the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA); one of the lawsuits affiliated with property rights groups also claims constitutional violations of property rights protections (ABAG/MTC, 2013a).²

How Tea Party and Property Rights Activists Viewed and Participated in the Plan and Process

Tea Party and property rights groups, including the East Bay Tea Party, Citizens Alliance for Property Rights, and Democrats Against Agenda 21, led the opposition to Plan Bay Area. Bay Area Citizens later formed and serves as a plaintiff in one of the lawsuits. Activists claimed that they represented diverse political backgrounds. Further, many citizens in opposition did not self-identify with particular groups. Interviewees typically stated that they volunteered their time and did not receive funding from outside sources, in contrast to participating staff from nonprofit planning advocacy organizations.

Plan Bay Area was an affront to the core values held by Tea Party and property rights activists, according to many interviewees and consistent with meeting observations. In particular, these activists framed their opposition to Plan Bay Area within a fundamental worldview not subject to compromise: Local governments with directly elected officials are the only legitimate bodies to determine future

land use decisions and growth; therefore, the regional plan would usurp local control. These activists viewed regional planning as unconstitutional government overreach in direct conflict with ideals of limited government and local government autonomy. They viewed regional agencies as particularly offensive because they are governed by board members whom typically local elected officials appointed to the board and thus are not directly accountable to voters; by extension, neither are the planners these agencies employ.

Activist interviewees expressed fear that regional agencies were in the pocket of developers and environmental and social justice groups, and that the plan would lead to a redistribution of wealth from property owners to affordable housing residents. Activists argued that U.S. sovereignty was at risk at the hands of a new world order influenced by the United Nations Agenda 21 and nonprofit organizations such as the APA and ICLEI (e.g., Koire, 2011).

Opponents also challenged the plan's contents. Activist interviewees acknowledged traffic congestion was an issue, but vehemently disagreed with the value of the state mandate to address climate change, the science behind it, and the need to develop regional transport and land use plans. Activists singled out for special criticism the plan directing new growth and funding to PDAs; activists argued that the plan's financial incentives manipulated cities into adopting high-density development and affordable housing, which they routinely labeled as "stack and pack" (e.g., Citizens' Alliance for Property Rights, n.d.). They claimed regional agencies and cities had not seriously factored in such development's high fiscal costs and negative impacts on public services such as schools, fire, and police. Activist interviewees further asserted that planners and board members did not respond directly to questions and dismissed comments at meetings. Moreover, the activists charged that regional planners did not indicate sufficiently how public comment later shaped the plan.

Activists chose to block the plan's adoption and public outreach process; they particularly focused on defeating the Delphi, a process through which stakeholders with different information, values, and opinions come to consensus on goals, objectives, and actions (e.g., Steel, 2012). Activists held training sessions and posted information online to demonstrate how to thwart the use of the Delphi method during public meetings (e.g., Democrats Against Agenda 21, 2012). As a result, citizens flooded public meetings. They also blocked planners' outreach activities by calling out questions, demanding answers on the legitimacy of unelected boards, questioning population projections, and requesting definitions of terms such as sustainability, equity, and social justice (e.g., Gass, 2011; Koire, 2012).

Interviewees noted that not all activists subscribed to these tactics; some refrained from interrupting. They also noted that some activists began to downplay assertions of Agenda 21 involvement and, sometimes, their Tea Party affiliations or affinity.

Occupy Redwood City (2012) even attended a meeting in solidarity, which demonstrated the bridging of divides: "Occupiers agree with Tea Partiers on very little, but we can agree on the lack of government accountability in the regional planning process . . ."

How Planning Proponents Saw the Plan and Responded to Critiques

The proponents of Plan Bay Area felt that holistic regional planning is key to improving sustainability and addressing the severe risks of climate change and is, moreover, mandated by state law (ABAG/MTC, 2013b). Interviewees defended the regional plan's focus on sustainability and affordable housing because it meshed with their personal worldviews. They countered some arguments of the opposition by claiming that the plan would increase property rights and value through encouraging cities to reform current zoning requirements, which often restrict the ways in which owners can use their property. They also defended their decision to direct future growth and dollars to compact areas by stressing that individual local governments in the region were not forced to comply with the regional plan (e.g., Hart, 2012).

Plan proponents interviewed considered the participation of Tea Party and property rights activists as illegitimate because they disrupted meetings and were thought to be acting on behalf of national Tea Party groups and the Koch Brothers. They typically lumped all opponents under the umbrella of Tea Partiers, dismissing as unfounded conspiracy theories activist claims about Agenda 21. Plan proponents also often asserted that the opposition was deliberately spreading misinformation and engaging in fear mongering and emotional manipulation. Proponent interviewees spoke with dismay and frustration of the rejection of planning itself and of the unwillingness of opponents to participate in the process let alone offer alternatives that could provide the basis for negotiation.

The rising opposition required regional planning agencies to adjust the public outreach process, planner interviewees noted. At first, agency staff co-facilitated public meetings with the Greenbelt Alliance, an environmental advocacy organization, and Silicon Valley Community Foundation, which had access to an interactive visual simulation tool, YouChoose. The proponents interviewed acknowledged this was a grave mistake. Making matters worse, using the YouChoose tool appeared to steer participants to selecting compact,

transit-oriented development. Not surprisingly, activists declared the meetings a farce.

Planners made changes in response; staff created an introductory video and reported planner interviewees, partly in an attempt to minimize opportunities for opponents to disrupt staff presentations. Interviewees on both sides also noted that elected officials and planning staff rarely spoke or addressed the audience in these sessions. Local law enforcement was alerted, and hired security guards were present at the meetings.

Looking at these events, a senior regional planner argued that planners would need to gear up for a new normal in which conservative activists are as present as those on the left. Another planner articulated the need to go beyond the tactics and understand that the core values of the activists, including distrust of government, the lack of accountability and transparency in the planning process, and the potentially negative impacts of plans on property rights. "Fifty percent of what they say is right," suggested one planner I interviewed.

Looking Forward

Legal challenges to Plan Bay Area are pending, and it is still early to see the long-term impacts of Tea Party and property rights activists. But it is clear that they have endeavored to create coalitions across ideological divides. Tea Party and property rights activists claimed publicly and in interviews that they had coordinated behind the scenes with progressive groups that hesitated to join in announcing the suit for fear of backlash within their networks. In addition, Tea Party and property rights groups generally spurred new citizens to participate.

Bay Area planners are rethinking the value of large-scale public meetings: "Given the organized tactics to disrupt meetings, the day of the meeting to get quality input is gone," commented a planner. Instead, regional planning agencies are considering smaller meetings, focus groups, "open house" formats, polls, or surveys; attending local community meetings; and working with nonprofits and community-based organizations: processes that the agencies undertook in the latter half of the public outreach process.

Atlanta Simmering

In 2010, the State of Georgia designated 12 regions in which voters would be asked to approve a 1% sales tax to be spent on transportation projects. The Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) provided staff support to a regional planning committee of elected officials who were charged with developing the list of transportation projects that

would be funded with the new sales tax revenue. Business organizations, among others, advocated for the passage of the tax increase and argued that the proposed projects would reduce traffic congestion, a major regional problem, and spur economic growth.

The proposed sales tax was designed to raise \$8.5 billion over 10 years to support nearly 160 transportation projects and related improvements, including freeway interchanges, rail extensions, and bus service upgrades. Remarkably, half of the funds were dedicated to public transit (ARC, 2011c). According to several interviewees, proponents routinely stressed that the sales tax measure and the projects it would support were the only viable alternatives to regional congestion problems, and that there is no Plan B. To develop the project list, regional proponents held multiple public meetings, town halls, community meetings, and focus groups, and conducted surveys and “wireside chat” conference calls with local officials in 2011 (ARC, 2011c). Proponents raised more than \$6 million in donations from major companies to campaign in support of the measure (Georgia Government Transparency and Campaign Finance Commission, 2012).

In July 2012, 63% of the population opposed the sales tax measure in the Atlanta region (although it passed in central-city Atlanta). Across the state, only three regions approved the tax measures (Georgia Department of Transportation, n.d.; www.metroatlantatransportationvote.com). Interviewees noted several reasons for the failure: a troubled economy, particularly in a state less open to tax increases; the July timing, when many residents were on vacation; and proponents positioning the measure’s program of projects as the only means for relieving traffic congestion.

How Opponents Viewed and Participated in the Plan and Process

Tea Party and property rights groups and participants affiliated with the Atlanta Tea Party, Georgia Tea Party Patriots, Fayette County Issues Tea Party, and the conservative Transportation Leadership Coalition (TLC), among others, led the opposition to the ballot measure. The Georgia Public Policy Foundation, a free enterprise-oriented research institute, issued papers assessing the sales tax measure and offering bus rapid transit (BRT) alternatives to rail proposals. As in the Bay Area, activist interviewees noted without prompting that they did not receive funding from national groups, although they had raised approximately \$30,000 in local donations to campaign against the sales tax measure.

Several conservative interviewees expressed deep ideological differences with sales tax proponents on both the types of projects to be funded and the regional approach to

policy-making. These strategies conflicted with their beliefs about fiscal responsibility, limited government, and free market economics: the cornerstone of Tea Party ideals. Activists felt that big business drove the process, and they questioned whether the regional commission would be responsive to local issues and accountable to local citizens. They also felt that regional planning efforts conflicted with the state constitution because board members were appointed and not elected (Fayette County Issues Tea Party, n.d.-a; TLC, 2012a, 2012b).

Within this framing, activists expressed concern about outsider organizations promoting regionalism, including the APA, ICLEI, PolicyLink, and the Urban Land Institute, among others. In language similar to that used by Bay Area opponents, TLC cautioned in a presentation slide that:

- Regionalism is being implemented all across the United States.
- Grants lure local governments into accepting sustainability policies.
- Pleasant-sounding names camouflage top-down, centralized planning programs.
- Public acceptance is gained by touting the programs as growing jobs or the economy.
- Visioning or consensus building workshops are used to get public buy-in for predetermined outcomes. (TLC, 2012a)

A TLC member commented, “The reason I got into this is to get the country back. . . . I was so disgusted with people lying, telling blatant lies. I could not take it anymore.” Echoing the concerns of planning scholars about the feasibility of planned rail projects (e.g., Chatman, 2013; Wachs, 1990), another interviewee noted that planning now is an “. . . orthodoxy. There is fear [from planning officials] that if we don’t have rail or TOD [transportation-oriented development], we are going to lose out on funds . . . an orthodoxy is being pushed.” Although less pervasive than in the Bay Area case, there was citizen resistance in outlying communities to perceived U.N. Agenda 21 activities. An interviewee cautioned that state legislators have “caught the Agenda 21 bug.”

Tea Party and property rights activists interviewed agreed that traffic congestion was a problem, but argued that the proposed projects were insufficient to address congestion and questioned whether there was a transport-funding crisis. They asserted that the proposed rail transit projects would require additional public subsidy and questioned whether the projects could be delivered on budget and time. They claimed that proponents used unsubstantiated “facts” and exaggerated plan benefits. They also strongly felt that the list of projects that would be

financed by the tax measure was developed for the business and developer community, in what they called “crony capitalism.”

Activists further insisted there were alternatives, or Plan Bs (e.g., Fayette County Issues Tea Party, n.d.-a; TLC, 2012b). They also framed the tax as unfair: “Many people do not realize that [the tax increase] will also tax food and prescription drugs. And for single mothers trying to put food on the table and for senior citizens barely able to make ends meet, this is a travesty” (Thompson, 2012). These arguments are consistent with those of transportation scholars who similarly argue against the use of sales taxes to fund transport because they are regressive; these arguments are also consistent with concerns that proposed projects are typically bundled together into disjointed lists to garner citizen votes and appease stakeholder interests (Goldman & Wachs, 2003; Wachs, 2003).

In a surprise move, just before the vote, the Sierra Club Georgia Chapter joined forces with the founders of the Atlanta Tea Party and Georgia Tea Party Patriots. The Sierra Club had developed a 20-page critique of the sales tax proposal and offered its own Plan B. They agreed with Tea Party groups that the proposed projects would not relieve traffic congestion, and they also felt meaningful transit options were lacking (Kiernan, 2012). Framed as Plan B, Sierra Club and Tea Party leaders issued a joint statement and recommended adjusting the current gas tax to provide more flexibility on how revenues could be spent; they also suggested how public transit could be better governed (Dooley & Kiernan, 2012). Tea Party members interviewed hoped that offering a Plan B would reduce claims that they were not willing to negotiate.

It is noteworthy that in the joint statement, Tea Party members explicitly accepted the need for gas taxes and the value of transportation demand strategies, such as telecommuting, vanpooling, and even transit and bicycling. Surprisingly, Tea Party and TLC members suggested in interviews that the gas tax could be replaced with charges for vehicle miles traveled, but only using systems that ensured data privacy, revenue distribution, project delivery, and project selection. As an alternative to regional planning, the Fayette County Issues Tea Party (n.d.-b) noted, “We recognize that there are region-wide issues, and believe they are best addressed through involved jurisdictions’ voluntary partnerships, rather than top-down dictates imposed by state and federal governments.”

In another counterintuitive alliance, the NAACP loosely joined the coalition of Tea Party activists and the Sierra Club (Johnson, 2012). It objected that the measure did not include funding for a rail line to DeKalb County and instead would support BRT. According to an NAACP

interviewee, the organization framed its opposition in terms of racial discrimination because it argued the community had been promised rail service in years past and that BRT was a poor substitute in terms of service and potential for economic development and job creation (e.g., Wheatley, 2012).

Opponents aired their position at public meetings and press conferences, and developed reports, fact sheets, videos, and blogs. TLC created a website called *Traffic Truth* (e.g., Fayette County Issues Tea Party, n.d.-a; www.traffictruth.net). Interviewees on both sides reported there was little disruption in the meetings, unlike those they had heard about in the Bay Area, although discussions did become heated and heartfelt.

How Planning Proponents Saw the Plan and Responded to Critiques

Proponents of the proposed sales tax included the business community, Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed, elected officials participating on the regional planning committee, and the Livable Communities Coalition, a group of 50 largely progressive nonprofit organizations supporting smart growth and transit. The Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce played a key role in establishing the primary education and political campaigns. As in the past, the Atlanta business community was at the forefront of proponents (Stone, 1989). The Livable Communities Coalition launched two campaigns to garner transit’s fair share of dollars and promote the measure’s transit component to voters.

The proponents of the Atlanta sales tax measure viewed the issue as a multidimensional crisis: the need to rescue residents and businesses from traffic congestion was linked to the threat of losing economic competitive edge and jobs to other cities. This, in turn, was linked to the need to compensate for underfunded transport projects that also would create new jobs. The main campaign slogan “Untie Atlanta” combined the metaphor with the tag line: “Less Traffic. More Jobs. Stronger Economy” (Citizens for Transportation Mobility, 2012). According to interviewees, proponents argued that the measure’s roster of projects was the only viable alternative: There is no Plan B.

Because the Tea Party, Sierra Club, and NAACP coalition emerged just before the vote, interviewees reported that sales tax proponents could do little to deflect media and public attention. Their only response was to repeat that there is no Plan B. Proponents interviewed reasoned that the sales tax measure would have been defeated anyway without the coalition because of the general anti-tax and government sentiment and the economic climate; however, it may have caused the margin of failure to be larger. A business interviewee reflected:

There was a giant tsunami of anti-government sentiment fueled by government distrust and general pessimism . . . there was a giant wave that capsized everything in its wake. . . . The Tea Party, Sierra Club, and NAACP were surfers in the wave and they caught it. When they talked, they got a lot of head nods. People were already thinking that way. They were saying what people were thinking.

Proponents interviewed also commented that the sales tax measure was the first time that the region's residents had become so engaged and aware of transportation issues. Proponents felt the election could serve as a learning experience for future efforts, particularly for developing new ways for the regional agency to better hear citizen concerns and demonstrate such listening. One interviewee suggested working directly with Tea Party representatives from the onset, as more than just cosmetic changes to the process are needed.

Looking Forward

At present, planning proponents are strategizing about future funding opportunities; Tea Party affiliates interviewed noted that they are working at the local level to monitor government actions, such as public spending and what they perceive as attacks on private property. Some Tea Party affiliates have begun collaborating with the NAACP to unseat local board members on various governing bodies that do not share their perspectives: "We don't fight city hall, we replace them," argued a Tea Party interviewee.

TLC recently announced it was redoubling efforts to oppose regionalism and launched a website called *Repeal Regionalism* to "to help educate the people of Georgia on the dangers of Regionalism and stop the growth of an unelected and unaccountable form of government" (TLC, 2013).

Tea Party groups have built on their collaboration with the Sierra Club and formed the Green Tea Coalition to jointly oppose other measures in the state and region, from the Atlanta Braves' move to the suburbs to raising electricity rates rather than depending more on solar energy (Kiernan & Gunning, 2013). How long this coalition remains intact, and its impact, remain to be seen.

Conclusion

In this study, I examine how proponents and opponents framed the issues and responded in two contentious regional megaplanning efforts. In both localities, the process was marked by participants' philosophical differences on the role of government and the necessity and value of regional plan-

ning. However, they also are deeply divided on plan substance, particularly the viability of the plan's key goals and strategies, fiscal costs, impacts, and the authenticity of the public outreach process. Both Tea Party and property rights activists, as well as planning proponents in the two cases, dismissed their respective opposition's analyses and claims. In the Bay Area, both sides accused the other of fear mongering and emotional manipulation. Activists in the two regions heavily used Internet-based communication to spread their message to affiliates and motivate participation.

However, Tea Party and property rights activists were not the only ones with substantive and procedural concerns. The tactical coalitions of unexpected allies that emerged demonstrate that more than politics makes strange bedfellows, as the saying goes. Rather, common ground on matters of content and process can be negotiated between seemingly diametrically opposed groups. In both cases, the objections of these partners centered on plan viability, finance methods and funding, project costs, impacts, and process. These concerns are not so far afield from those in other planning research that questions the viability of certain transportation options and the equity implications of different financing mechanisms. This demonstrates continuing challenges and flaws in the regional planning process.

The case analysis suggests that planning and research communities should not dismiss Tea Party or property rights opposition as unworthy of attention or careful deliberation. Since all evidence shows that property rights opposition will endure (Jacobs, 2010, 2012; Jacobs & Paulsen, 2009), Tea Party and property rights activists could catalyze new coalitions of opponents if planners do not attend to the substantive and procedural concerns. Thus, I recommend three interrelated avenues for further consideration.

First, in light of the concern of a range of opponents to plan content and effects, I suggest building on Jacobs and Paulsen's (2009) work. They recommend that plans contain a property rights impact statement, much like an environmental impact statement. However, their suggested impact statement should be broadened to include the fiscal impacts of public service burdens and benefits as well as full lifecycle cost assessments of capital projects, which include long-term maintenance and operations. At the regional scale, activists may be skeptical about the motivations of regional officials; thus, interested local jurisdictions could undertake these analyses individually or in partnership with neighboring jurisdictions. Planners would need to pursue joint fact finding and analysis; these analyses could be conducted on a range of scenarios, including worst case as envisioned by those most concerned about

planning impacts. Since the goal of these assessments is to inform the larger planning process, unlike environmental reviews, a preferred alternative need not be selected.

Second, interviewees in each region noted that planning agencies could be more explicit on how public involvement has shaped the plan. Thus, developing ways to convey specifically the interrelationship between the plan and public input is warranted. Third, as the cases focus on regional processes, additional research should be pursued that examines plan content and processes at multiple scales, sectors, and geographies facing similar opposition. This kind of research would further the knowledge base, helping to identify communities or regions that had cultivated methods for proceeding with planning in mutually beneficial ways. This recommendation aligns with those of scholars who argue that traditional planning methods need vast improvement (e.g., Forester, 2009, 2013; Innes & Booher, 2004, 2010) and could potentially benefit from new digital communication technologies (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010; Mandarano, Meenar, & Steins, 2010). At the same time, research is needed on the use and impacts of social media and Internet-based communication by planning participants in light of Shipley and Utz's (2012) assertion that this could be a game-changer in how non-planners engage with planning. Internet and social media communication can also affect participant mobilization and how various stakeholders interpret public processes and actions.

Overall, taking these steps would improve public dialog across the political spectrum. This would serve planning practice well in the face of increasing polarization and public discontent with government on many fronts (Horwitz, 2013; Skocpol & Williamson, 2011).

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Notes

1. I use the term “megapanning” to emphasize the large-scale nature of these planning efforts building from the megaprojects literature where projects are complex, costly, controversial, colossal, and laden with issues over control, accountability, transparency, and comprehensibility (i.e., projects too big and far reaching to be easily comprehended) in decision making (e.g., Flyvbjerg, 2009; Trapenberg Frick, 2008).

2. Plaintiffs in the four lawsuits are: 1) Bay Area Citizens, a nonprofit formed by and affiliated with Tea Party and property rights groups and with assistance from the Pacific Legal Foundation, a conservative nonprofit organization; 2) Post-Sustainability Institute, which is affiliated with Democrats Against Agenda 21, and Freedom Advocates; 3) environmental groups of Earthjustice, Communities for a Better Environment, and the Sierra Club; and 4) Building Industry Association of the Bay Area. In brief, environmental groups filed out of concern that the regional plan did not go far enough in dedicating sufficient funds to transit service and that low-income residents could suffer from neighborhood gentrification and displacement without additional measures to provide for and maintain affordable housing. The building coalition charges that the plan's designation of most housing growth to PDAs is too restrictive and unrealistic, and that new housing should be encouraged in suburban areas. Primarily representing property rights interests, Bay Area Citizens' main argument is that high-density development is not needed for meeting carbon reduction requirements because expected future improvements to fuel technology and efficiency will bring the region into attainment instead. The other property rights-based lawsuit claims that the plan violates constitutional property rights protections in addition to CEQA.

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