

Thursday, April 23, 2009

Editorial: Folly comes to Fullerton

Scourge of government redevelopment looms.

The Orange County Register

Those who are familiar with the history of "urban renewal" in Orange County would recognize that the city of Fullerton retains its historic charm and eclectic downtown largely because the city has avoided the sort of heavy-handed government redevelopment efforts that destroyed Anaheim's old downtown and has caused so much harm throughout the region. Now, Fullerton city officials, led by city staff and some council members, are trying to dramatically expand government redevelopment efforts in the city – something that will undermine property rights in a 1,165-acre area.

The City Council is scheduled to vote on this project May 5.

Redevelopment – the term for government-directed and subsidized rebuilding efforts – is the preferred tool of government planners. Even though cities such as Fullerton thrive and prosper because of the entrepreneurial activities of individual businesses and customers, government agencies prefer central planning to the unpredictable forces of freedom. Redevelopment

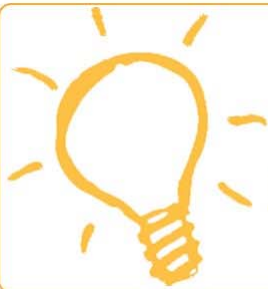
agencies determine that areas of their cities are "blighted," not based on any real-world definition of blight, but on various legal descriptions that allow them to essentially control swaths of private property. Within these redevelopment areas, city officials can lavish taxpayer subsidies on favored developers, who then build projects preferred by city officials. Within redevelopment areas, eminent-domain abuse is common. Cities take private property – or threaten to take it if owners don't sell out – not for public uses such as roads or schools, but to redistribute to big-box stores, auto dealerships or other retailers that promise big sales-tax returns. The city of Fullerton wants to add this power to 25 percent of the city.

"The council is being asked to declare as blighted all 167 small businesses along West Commonwealth," wrote county Supervisor Chris Norby, a former Fullerton councilman, in a column in a local weekly. "All of these business owners must realize that a blight designation automatically makes them subject to possible future eminent domain. ... Expansion means the agency will divert even more property tax funds from local government." Mr. Norby is a longtime activist against corporate welfare and eminent domain, but he is speaking out against the plan because of his concern of what it will do to the county budget.

Fullerton Councilman Don Bankhead defended the absurd blight designation that allows the massive land grab: "The inclusion of nonblighted property in the amendment area is permitted by the Community Redevelopment Law," he wrote. Mr. Bankhead argued that the redevelopment plan will address overcrowding, high industrial vacancy rates and will expand "affordable" housing.

In our view, the market can handle overcrowding

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and commercial vacancy rates if only city bureaucrats would get out of the way. We think a functioning marketplace, rather than government-subsidized low-income housing projects, is the best way to promote affordability.

The May 5 vote in Fullerton pits Mr. Bankhead and other advocates of government planning against those who believe in limited government, property rights and freedom. Fullerton residents need to show up at the council meeting and let the council know which side of the issue they stand on.

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