

Hundreds show up for debate on planning grant  
written by Newspark Team | June 8, 2011

The public and the Albemarle Board of Supervisors debated Wednesday whether a \$1 million federal grant is a golden opportunity for cooperative planning or a Trojan Horse threatening individual liberties and private property rights.

✖ A spirited crowd of more than 300 packed Lane Auditorium at the Albemarle County Office Building to discuss the Livable Communities Planning Project and the county's efforts to reduce carbon emissions. More than 85 people signed up to speak during the lengthy public hearing.

The three-year U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development grant, already awarded to the Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission , is intended to help coordinate a joint review of Albemarle and Charlottesville's comprehensive and transportation plans. Albemarle staff recommended Wednesday that the board endorse the project.

In addition to questioning the grant, Supervisor Kenneth C. Boyd sought on two occasions earlier this year to end Albemarle's membership in Local Governments for Sustainability .

"If someone had told me we were going to become the stewards of the community and tell them what to do and regulate what they do ... I wouldn't have signed off on that," Boyd said during the staff presentation early in the evening.

Albemarle staff responded that the \$1,200 annual fee to ICLEI provides them access to software to baseline and measure the community's carbon footprint.

✖ "I believe this whole discussion has slid into whether you are for or against sustainability," said Boyd, reflecting on a significant lobbying effort taking place in the community. "I don't think that's what the discussion is — the question is who do we take our direction from, this board or some national or international group?"

"I think your presumption about someone outside directing anything is ridiculous," responded Supervisor Dennis S. Rooker .

Nelson County resident Albert C. Weed , a two-time local candidate for the U.S. Congress, told the supervisors they should not respond to "scare mongering."

"America's response to climate change has been stymied at the national level by what amounts to a tribalistic fear of science," Weed said. "What matters to our future, then, is what we do at the local level. ... If this county pulls back from existing voluntary cooperative efforts, the message it sends will be clear ... we can be stampeded by the criminally ignorant for short-term political gain."

Mark Graham , Albemarle's director of community development, said no recommendations from the grant would be binding and that only the board could decide what would be implemented. In addition, he said the grant would provide funding for the county's effort to improve the Comprehensive Plan.

"State code requires us to review the plan every five years and to have a Comprehensive Plan," Graham said. "Incremental updates over last 15 years have caused the document to be long and difficult for the public to use."

✖ Opponents of the grant and ICLEI, who appeared to be a much smaller crowd in the audience, held signs that read “We the people; Sustain liberty.” Supporters of the initiatives held up signs that read “Use common sense; Use good tools” and “A voice for common sense.”

Carole Thorpe , chairwoman of the Jefferson Area Tea Party , has called for the community to withdraw from the grant. Tea Party members have argued that the grant is a “federal intrusion” into local affairs and a United Nations-linked effort aimed at behavioral change and social justice goals.

County resident and Tea Party member Chris Winter arrived early and was the first to speak at the public hearing.

“I am here because I am concerned about the relationship between ICLEI and the United Nations ... and some of the positions taken by some of these board members,” said Winter in an interview. “I don’t want ICLEI in Charlottesville — if people in community want to protect our natural resources, we can do it without the help of the UN.”

Tea Party members also pointed out that the grant is expected to make recommendations on how to implement the community’s 1998 Sustainability Accords . Tea Party member Charles Battig has argued that the accords, and the grant agreement, come straight from the U.N.’s “sustainability playbook.” He has told the board it poses a threat to individual decision making on such issues as population, transportation, housing and use of natural resources.

Lonnie Murray attended the meeting and spoke on behalf of Albemarle’s Natural Heritage Committee .

“We support ... these endeavors, primarily for the local benefits in terms of protecting our collective quality of life, enhancing our natural resources, and creating jobs here in Albemarle County,” said Murray in a statement provided to the board. “Developing better designed communities reduces the amount of expensive infrastructure and valuable resources we need in the future, saving money and promoting efficiency.”

Supervisor Boyd said that he thought most everyone in the room would agree that the local environment should be protected. Murray said that sustainability also contributed to local prosperity.

“Sustainability is inherently a good thing,” said Murray. “[It] suggests a vision whereby economic prosperity occurs in an ecologically smart and socially just way, protecting our natural resources for future generations.”

Timothy Hulbert, president of the Charlottesville Regional Chamber of Commerce , said he had been involved for two years in the Local Climate Action Planning Process . He suggested one possible compromise.

“We have maintained that efficiency and conservation are values held clearly in all of private enterprise,” Hulbert said. “I don’t know if ICLEI is driving that, and I don’t care, nor does the Chamber.”

“We do care about consolidated planning ... so I would suggest that you sign that [grant] agreement,” Hulbert added. “The ICLEI [membership] may be too polarizing.”

After more than 40 speakers, supporters of the grant outnumbered opponents by almost a 2 to 1

margin. The public hearing continued until after press time.

See the Daily Progress and Charlottesville Tomorrow websites on Thursday for complete coverage of the meeting and the board's deliberations.