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The View from Andy's Desk

April 15, 2011-Andrew R. Cassano is a City/Regional Planner and Professional Land Surveyor with more than 41 years of experience in Northern California. He is CEO of Nevada City Engineering, Inc., a firm offering regional planning, surveying, and civil engineering consulting to the private and public sector since 1978

Mammas, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to be Environmental Planners!

Let them be land surveyors and engineers and such. OK, I apologize for paraphrasing that great country song written by Ed and Patsy Bruce, although their recommendation was to avoid cowboy careers. All of us planners are trained in environmental planning, as we all do environmental initial studies and administer EIR's in our careers. But once you become a serious environmental planner, your life can never be the same.

Gone forever are the simple luxuries of paradigms, extreme points of view, and easy solutions. Suddenly, your thought process becomes completely objective. Subjective is no longer allowed. Every public policy decision has pros and cons, and the world becomes shades of gray. Your friends of both major political leanings no longer trust you, fearing that you are just a little too sympathetic to that crazy other side. Anyone with an agenda is a little leery that you haven't enthusiastically jumped on board. It's so lonely at times.

I've studied the work of a lot of good environmental planners like Rudy Platzek and Larry Seaman, but I mostly blame my friend Peter Chamberlin, an environmental planner that I worked with another lifetime ago. Later Peter would partner with my friend Rick Dejesus in the firm of Environalysis to do a number of Environmental Impact Reports in the 1980's. Peter and I argued over his objective observations endlessly, until one day I snapped. Then I suddenly understood the mission of the pure environmental planner.

Don't get me wrong, I love my left and right friends and all the points of views and agendas of our community. I love my friends that are loggers, developers, environmentalists, miners, Realtors, and all the other diverse folks. Diversity is what makes the region work, although it fatigues us at times. It's absolutely necessary to throw all of the ideas out on the table, hold them up to the light of day, publically debate them, and make decisions to carry on. Together.

OK, so let's go through a simple exercise to show you a glimpse of my torment. The automobile is absolutely essential to our current economy. The automobile is the most serious source of non-point source environmental pollution. Both true statements. And see? I made me say something that I didn't want to hear, since I've always loved motor vehicles (with either 2 or 4 wheels).

The legal bible of environmental planners is the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) guidelines, the regulatory tool so dear to planners, lawyers, activists, and obstructionists. In our practice here, we represent our clients according to their role in the CEQA process. Sometimes we represent development permit applicants and sometimes Lead or Responsible agencies.

For private clients, we strive to plan projects that pre-mitigate or offset legitimate environmental concerns and then work with the Lead Agency to agree on mitigation (offsetting) measures that are reasonable, feasible, and legal in their requirements.

For Lead Agency clients, we strive to clearly identify the legitimate environmental concerns, fashion effective mitigation measures, and work with the project proponents toward agreement on the impact reducing requirements.

For Responsible Agency clients, we work to understand their agency's concerns and values, and then work with the Lead Agency and project proponent toward solid and effective mitigations.

By law, mitigation measures need to meet several standards. They need to address physical impacts (not socio-economic impacts). Mitigations need to be effective, within the control of the Lead Agency, reasonably connected to the impact, and roughly proportional to the impact. Finally, they must be feasible.

Sorry, but we don't do environmental work for project opponents. Our longtime company culture, beginning with our founder Ken Baker, is that we like to be "for" stuff. But we heartily support the rights of folks who are "against" stuff. It's the diversity of thought and love of our community that makes us strong.

Anyway, I continue coping with my environmental planner condition. Don't worry: I don't think it's contagious. And please keep your points of view coming.