

Dealing with Growth (and Central Planners)

By John Cobin, Ph.D. for the *Times-Examiner*
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It seems that the central planners are up to it again—that is the central planner variety found in upstate South Carolina. In the May 5th edition of *The Times Examiner* an article appeared entitled “County Increases Safety Awareness,” and in the May 21st edition of *The Greenville News* a report appeared entitled “Clemson Study to Help Guide Smart Growth” (p. B1), both of which indicate a rather serious infestation of liberalism.

The Greenville County Council has proclaimed a Building Safety Week ceremony recognizing the dedicated building safety and fire prevention staff members. Councilman Mark Kingsbury called these groups “the front line of defense to protect the public.” This mixture of professions is sort of curious since building regulators have such an ineffective, inefficient, and even sordid record, while fire fighters largely have just the opposite record. In the same way that large-scale central planning failed in Eastern Europe, small-scale local planners will likely fail to do as well as the free market.

In the second article, Clemson professor Barry Nocks was reported to have said that unrestrained “development will ultimately lead to less economic growth” and that “rational planning makes sense” given the expected boom that will hit the upstate. This is sheer nonsense. Economic booms are beneficial, even if the growth experience is not palatable to well-refined socialist ideologues. What is so bad about unbridled expansion of industry? It is not bad for people who want jobs and profits. I guess the world is a little different for a socialist/greener journalist or academic drawing a paycheck from a more cerebral lifestyle.

I wish that these central planning advocates would produce proof that government regulation of buildings actually makes them safer or of higher quality. They just assume such is the case. They glibly say things like, “countless lives have been saved because of the building safety codes adopted and enforced by local and state agencies.” What they do not say is how many more lives might have been saved if there were no government regulation of buildings. What evidence do they have for their claims of effectiveness? How about that massive building failures in Paris, Seoul, and Kuala Lumpur?

There is much evidence against the planners’ dream. Building safety codes do, as the first article said, “provide safeguards to protect the public from natural disasters.” But there is reason to doubt that they are efficient or effective. In my book *Building Regulation, Market Alternatives, and Allodial Policy* (1997), as well as an article published in *Planning and Markets* entitled “Fire Safety Regulation in Northeastern Santiago, Chile” (2000), I provide a survey of scholarly literature that questions the effectiveness and efficiency of government regulation. I also provide evidence of the failure of government regulation in Baltimore, Northeastern Santiago (Chile), and two counties in West Virginia and Pennsylvania. Plus, I provide a manner of market-based regulation which would likely work better.

Along with the dramatic rise in building regulation and regulators, there was a dramatic increase of structural fires in Baltimore during regulated years (1859-1994) of over 1500%, while population density dropped. Similarly, northeastern Santiago experienced a 890% increase in structural fires since regulation began in 1929 despite massive increases in building safety regulation. Homes built in the American counties which I studied that did not have any building code were of remarkably higher quality than those built in cities within those same counties that did have a code. I reviewed general safety theories, relevant reports of fire tragedies worldwide (highlighting construction or inspection failures), policy proposals for safety regulation, and other pertinent data. The recent failure of a government-inspected airport terminal building in Paris is but one debacle of a long history of government failures.

It is high time for upstate people—including the Greenville County Council—to reject the liberal and leftist rhetoric. Let’s eradicate the presumption in Pickens and Greenville Counties that local central land use planning and building regulation are beneficial activities in the public interest.