

The Agenda 21 Controversy and Your Town

A Fact-Based Toolkit for Town Leaders & Concerned Citizens

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is a first-of-its kind toolkit to inform NJ citizens about anti-Agenda 21 discussions and actions happening in NJ towns and counties.

The Truth About Agenda 21

“Agenda 21” is a non-binding, voluntarily implemented set of recommendations of the United Nations with regard to sustainable development. It was first approved in 1992 by 178 nations. President George H.W. Bush signed for the United States. The "21" in Agenda 21 refers to the 21st century. It has no force of law of any kind in the United States.

Agenda 21 presents a vision for how all levels of government—especially in the developing world—can take voluntary action to combat poverty and pollution, conserve natural resources and develop in a sustainable manner. [Read the full Agenda 21 document on the United Nations' website.](#)

What is the Agenda 21 Controversy?

Around the country, a conspiracy theory is gaining ground at the local and state government levels that holds that the United Nations is secretly working to take over the United States government. Groups and individuals that adhere to this conspiracy are using the United Nations document called Agenda 21 as proof.

As absurd as this may sound, this conspiracy theory is being used to successfully derail local participation in sustainable development efforts, slow environmentally sound land use decisions, and delay sensible long-term resource planning.

And it is happening in New Jersey too. In late November 2012, the Frelinghuysen, NJ town council voted 3-2 to end its ties with Sustainable Jersey.* They did so after hearing testimony from a NJ resident who spoke about his belief that Sustainable Jersey is linked to Agenda 21, which he believes is a secret United Nations conspiracy to take away U.S. citizens' personal freedoms and property rights under the guise of sustainable development.

[Click here to see a list of 2012 NJ Agenda 21 Controversy activities.](#)

There's good reason to think that these kinds of discussions will crop up more frequently in NJ towns. A Dec. 26, 2012 [New York Times article](#) states that the Tea Party and people aligned with Tea Party thinking will turn from broad national issues to focus on state and local issues, including Agenda 21.

We can't let that happen in New Jersey. After Hurricane Sandy, it's more important than ever that NJ citizens work with our local governments towards rational, reasonable solutions to our very real development, growth, and planning issues.

What actions can stop the Agenda 21 Controversy from derailing sustainable initiatives in New Jersey towns?

We hope you use this toolkit to be better informed, and [share this information with your town council, green team, environmental commission and planning board to better understand these discussions too.](#)

We hope you find it to be a realistic, effective, comprehensive resource to nullify the arguments of Agenda 21 conspiracy adherents, and keep your town moving forward towards economic, community, and environmental well-being.

Special thanks to Matt Polsky for his significant support, contributions, and editing.

--Claire Sommer
Agenda 21 Information Coordinator
North Jersey Public Policy Network

North Jersey Public Policy Network is a non-partisan, non-profit 100% volunteer network that provides citizens with factual information on public policy issues in order to promote informed decision making. www.northjerseypublicpolicy.org

The Nov. 29, 2012 New Jersey Herald newspaper article "Frelinghuysen township cuts ties to Sustainable Jersey" is available at: <http://www.njherald.com/story/20223774/frelinghuysen-twp-cuts-ties-to-sustainable-jersey> (subscription required).

Agenda 21 Controversy Toolkit

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT THE AGENDA 21 CONTROVERSY

What is this Agenda 21 conspiracy theory about?

The Agenda 21 conspiracy theory is that this UN resolution is actually part of a secret United Nations conspiracy to deny Americans their property and individual rights. It is promoted by Tea Party-aligned thinkers including Glenn Beck, who published a dystopian novel (originally written by Harriet Parke) called *Agenda 21* in 2012.

The New York Times published an article about this issue on Aug. 29, 2012:

[Republican Platform Opposes Agenda 21](#)

“Agenda 21 is a 1992 United Nations resolution that encourages sustainable development globally. Although it is non-binding and has no force of law in the United States, it has increasingly become a point of passionate concern to a circle of Republican activists who argue that the resolution is part of a United Nations plot to deny Americans their property rights.

The Record published an article focusing on actions in NJ on Sept. 29, 2012:

[Protest of global program grows locally as Tea Party links 'smart growth' to big government](#)

“The Passaic County freeholders canceled membership in a leading environmental organization. Wayne Township Council members passed a resolution condemning “extreme environmentalism.” In Morris and Ocean counties, freeholders adopted resolutions to quell concerns about a decades-old United Nations green program. Each measure is a response to growing public protest over the U.N. program, known as Agenda 21, which promotes conservation of natural resources or sustainable development.

What is Agenda 21?

Agenda 21 is a non-binding, voluntarily implemented set of recommendations of the United Nations with regard to sustainable development. It was first approved in 1992 by 178 nations attending the 1992 Earth Summit. President George H.W. Bush signed the agreement for the United States. The "21" in Agenda 21 refers to the 21st century. It has no force of law of any kind in the United States.

Agenda 21 presents a vision for how all levels of government—especially in the developing world—can take voluntary action to combat poverty and pollution, conserve natural resources and develop in a sustainable manner.

Agenda 21 is not a treaty or legally binding document and does not infringe upon the sovereignty of any nation, state, or local government. Agenda 21 does not advocate for abolishing private property or have any bearing on U.S. local and state land-use

decisions. In other words, it isn't being forced on anybody, anywhere, by any organization.

A chapter within Agenda 21 introduces the concept of a "Local Agenda 21," and offers a vision for how local governments can develop their own sustainability initiatives. A key theme with Agenda 21 was local self-determination and community engagement: "Each local authority should enter into a dialogue with its citizens, local organizations and private enterprises. Through consultation and consensus-building, local authorities would learn from citizens and from local, civic, community, business and industrial organizations and acquire the information needed for formulating the best strategies. The process of consultation would increase household awareness of sustainable development issues."¹

[Read the full Agenda 21 document on the United Nations' website.](#)

¹ <http://www.iclei.org/about-iclei/faqs/faq-iclei-the-united-nations-and-agenda-21#what-is-agenda-21>

What is sustainable development and sustainability?

In 1987, the United Nations released the [Brundtland Report](#), which included what is now one of the most widely recognized definitions: "**Sustainable development** is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It is a broad term and is not synonymous with Agenda 21.

Here's how the United States EPA defines [Sustainability](#): "Everything that we need for our survival and well-being depends, either directly or indirectly, on our natural environment. Sustainability creates and maintains the conditions under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony, that permit fulfilling the social, economic and other requirements of present and future generations.

Sustainability is important to making sure that we have, and will continue to have, the water, materials, and resources to protect human health and our environment."

What is Sustainable Jersey?

Sustainable Jersey is a certification program for municipalities in New Jersey. Launched in 2009, Sustainable Jersey is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that supports community efforts to reduce waste, cut greenhouse gas emissions, and improve environmental equity. It provides tools, training and financial incentives to support and reward communities as they pursue sustainability programs. Sustainable Jersey is one hundred percent voluntary and each town can choose whether it wants to get certified and the actions it wants to do in order to achieve enough points to get certified.²

New Jersey is the first state in the nation to have a comprehensive sustainability program for communities that links certification with strong state and private financial incentives, and a fully resourced program of technical support and training.³ To date, 378 municipalities have registered.

² SustainableJersey.com

³ <http://www.nj.gov/dep/opsc/index.html>

What is ICLEI and is it connected to Agenda 21 or the United Nations?

ICLEI, short for “International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives,” was founded in 1990 to connect local governments engaged in sustainability, climate protection, and clean energy initiatives. In the United States, ICLEI USA is a not-for-profit membership organization. It is not connected to Agenda 21 or the United Nations. Please note that ICLEI was founded two years before Agenda 21 was ratified.

[Read ICLEI USA's FAQ about the false anti-Agenda 21 controversy.](#)

Do local planning documents and Sustainable Jersey and ICLEI have words and ideas in common with Agenda 21?

Absolutely yes, and appropriately so. It only makes sense that NJ communities are preparing for the future rather than allowing sprawl, ad hoc decision making, and the next Hurricane Sandy to hold us back.

Finding a conspiracy in the fact that reasonable people around the globe want many of the same things--prosperous, healthy communities--is like saying we shouldn't brush our teeth because the United Nations has set hygiene goals for third-world countries.

It is a false premise to say that policies that benefit the community are at odds with personal freedoms. In fact, strong, vibrant communities support individual prosperity and success.

What's at risk if anti-Agenda 21 advocates get their way?

Writing for *The Atlantic* magazine's Cities website in December 2011, planning expert Anthony Flint discussed the following impacts by anti-Agenda 21 advocates:

[How the Tea Party is Upending Urban Planning](#)

Across the country, Tea Party activists have been storming planning meetings of all kinds, opposing various plans by local and regional government having anything to do with density, smart growth, sustainability or urbanism.

What's prompting the ire is anything from a proposed master plan to a new water treatment plant, rules governing septic tanks, or a bike-sharing program. What's driving the rebellion is a view that government should have no role in planning or shaping the built environment that in any way interferes with private property rights.

Flint followed up with his ideas on how to best engage Agenda 21 conspiracy thinkers in a February 2012 article called: [Why Planners Need to Take Agenda 21 Criticism More Seriously](#).

Where can I learn more about the Agenda 21 conspiracy perspective?

There are many anti-Agenda 21 websites. Here are a few examples:

<http://www.postsustainabilityinstitute.org/>

<http://americanpolicy.org/>

<http://agenda21news.com/>

What's next for New Jersey towns after Hurricane Sandy?

As we all recover from Hurricane Sandy's destruction, many towns are starting to think about the best ways to re-build and plan for surviving future weather catastrophes. Professional engineers, planners, environmental experts and scientists are discussing how rational planning, rational use of scarce resources, and sustainability will help us move forward.

Here's [one article](#) that talks about some of the discussions underway.

Where can I learn more about NJ environmental and planning issues?

NJ Department of Environmental Protection: www.state.nj.us/dep

NJ DEP Office of Sustainability and Green Energy (SAGE): www.nj.gov/dep/sage

NJ Future: www.NJFuture.org

NJ.gov's Open Space and Farmland Preservation: www.state.nj.us/nj/green/opensp

TOGETHER NORTH JERSEY: togethernorthjersey.com/

Who can I contact for more information?

Please contact North Jersey Public Policy Network volunteer Claire Sommer at claire@kayakmedia.com.

SUGGESTED TALKING POINTS FOR AGENDA 21 CONVERSATIONS

What's the most important thing to keep in mind?

People who believe in conspiracies are entitled to their opinions but they are not entitled to make up their own facts.

A [January 2013 report](#) from Fairleigh Dickinson University's PublicMind Poll group found that a majority of registered voters believe in at least one political conspiracy theory.

This doesn't make the theories true. It just means a lot of people believe in them.

Beware the "Gish Gallop." The Gish Gallop is a debating technique of overwhelming your opponent in an avalanche of half-truths and unverifiable statements. In essence, this lets the person "gallop away" from a reasonable discussion while lending an air of authority due to their vast knowledge. The Gish Gallop has no place in civil, rational discussion.

Doesn't engaging with conspiracy theorists just give them attention?

Ignoring or marginalizing conspiracy theory believers because their statements are irrational does not make them go away.

The best way to nullify irrational, outlandish, and often angry, rhetoric is by passionately focusing on reality-based, law-based decision making that benefits our citizens, communities, businesses and the natural world—close to home and around the world.

It can feel uncomfortable or confrontational to correct misleading, incomplete or untrue statements. But sometimes this is the necessary first step for productive discussions about what's best for our towns and how to have a great community.

What's the best way to discuss property rights, planning and sustainability issues with people who think Agenda 21 is a global conspiracy?

Ask for facts. The Agenda 21 conspiracy theory rests on implications, loose associations, and slippery slope conclusions of potential future possibilities

Here's an analogy to put unrealistically remote possibilities into perspective. Should I be concerned about using a movie ticket that says "Subject to terms and conditions" on it? What if those conditions changed and a requirement of purchasing the ticket was that I had to buy \$100 worth of popcorn? Since this is a possibility, should I refuse to go into the movie theater or convince everyone else to boycott the theater?⁴

This extreme example is silly, of course, but while individuals have broad freedoms to make choices for themselves, it's no way to run our towns.

When it comes to discussing what's best for our town and communities, the fairest way to protect everyone's rights is to use facts and current laws. Our local town councils and planning boards are charged with making the best possible decisions they can, based on facts and our laws, in a reasonable and responsible timeframe.

Our local officials make decisions that are deemed best for our town, but they must also keep the "big picture" in mind. That's a hard balance to strike sometimes. But we must help them to do this. We are all connected. No one town is an island. When we make sustainable decisions as a town, our actions benefit our state, nation and the world.

Each of us is entitled to our own opinions when it comes to local decision-making, but not our own facts.

4 Credit to Gail Collins for this idea: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/06/opinion/collins-santorum-strikes-again.html>

What about the anti-Agenda 21 argument that eminent domain, environmental regulation and zoning laws are undermining personal property rights?

An essential part of private property rights is that individuals do not have the right to harm others or their property. Our laws say that protecting the rights of many individuals may supersede individual rights. For instance, how would you feel if your neighbor wanted to dump toxic waste next to your house?

We live in a society where the rights of individuals are protected as well as the rights of law-abiding, safety conscious citizens as a whole. This is known as the Public Trust doctrine.

The Public Trust doctrine holds that the public has rights in public lands, waters and living resources and that the state has an obligation to preserve the resources for the benefit of its citizens.⁵

Because of NJ's extensive coastline, New Jersey courts have a long history of discussing and ruling on the Public Trust Doctrine as it relates to our citizens' rights to enjoy our beaches. Read more about it in this NJDEP handbook called: "[PUBLIC ACCESS IN NEW JERSEY: The Public Trust Doctrine and Practical Steps to Enhance Public Access](#)". Another example of the Public Trust Doctrine in New Jersey is the [New Jersey Highlands Council](#). This body has some regional authority to limit development in order to protect water resources.

It is also important to remember that New Jersey has a strong history of Home Rule. Home Rule grants towns the right to pass laws as long as they are consistent with Federal and State laws.

Healthy debate between these two mindsets—the Public Trust and Home Rule—helps ensure that all aspects of an issues are heard and considered. This kind of debate is going on right now throughout New Jersey as we decide how best to rebuild and recover from Hurricane Sandy.

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http://www.hangle.com/ufiles/warren_protecting_natural_resources_under_the_public_trust_doctrine.pdf

What about the argument that if you read the Agenda 21 document, it becomes obvious that private property rights are in danger?

It is a gross misrepresentation of the Agenda 21 document to say that its primary focus and intent is to proscribe development and private property rights. In fact, the nearly 300-page Agenda 21 document provides a comprehensive approach to a broad range of sustainability issues, including business development. The real point of the document is to suggest a collaborative process among all stakeholders to determine, in any particular country or context, the best way to address many sustainability issues.⁶

6 John C. Dernbach [The Unfinished Story of the Rio Plus 20 Conference](#).

What about the argument that Agenda 21 will erase American ideals, values, and history?

The irony of this concern is that much of the thinking and experience behind sustainable development is deeply American and that other countries have historically taken their lead from us. Here is some history:

“The first four U.S. presidents—Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison—were farmers or plantation owners, and all recognized that good agriculture conservation practices increase agricultural output and national strength. The conservation ethic espoused by Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, and others recognized the importance of ensuring that resources are available for later generations.

At the end of World War II, the United States was deeply involved in creating institutions to support and foster development in Europe and around the world. It is no small thing that the first formulation of sustainable development, a 1980 paper by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (now called the International Union for the Conservation of Nature), described the concept as combining conservation and development.”⁷

7 John C. Dernbach [The Unfinished Story of the Rio Plus 20 Conference](#).

What about the argument that property rights are sacrosanct?

As members of society, our property rights don't mean anything without a government there to recognize and enforce them.

Instead of a focus just on rights, what about responsibilities? Isn't that what conservatives tell the rest of us on other issues? These responsibilities could include protecting the clean water sources we all depend on, the species we share the planet with and our responsibilities as citizens to care for our communities for future generations.

If people are going to complain about what they see as "Takings," then it's only fair that they acknowledge "Givings" as well. The latter is related to President Obama's and Senator Elizabeth Warren's point that private wealth is gained **in part** through the taxpayer funded government investments that provide the educational, police, crop production research and other conditions **without which** private success is almost impossible. The property values they so focus on are what they are, in part, because government actions helped them get as high as they did.

What about the argument that New Jersey towns shouldn't participate in Sustainable Jersey, have Green Teams, plan for future Hurricane Sandy-like events, promote sustainability education or consider the environment in planning decisions because of a secret UN plot that cannot be proven precisely because it is a secret?

People who believe in an Agenda 21 conspiracy theory have no fact-based, reasonable alternatives to solve our long-term problems. Everyone suffered in Hurricane Sandy's wake. It is going to take the united efforts of all NJ citizens to do the work that needs to be done to prevent future suffering.

I've never heard of Agenda 21 conspiracy activities. Can you give me examples?

Feb. 3, 2012

The New York Times reports on anti-Agenda 21 efforts impacting affecting local development and land use decision-making, including in Alabama, Maine, Florida, and Texas.

"Activists Fight Green Projects, Seeing U.N. Plot"

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/04/us/activists-fight-green-projects-seeing-un-plot.html>

Feb. 14, 2012

The Ocean County NJ Board of Chosen Freeholders passes a resolution opposing Agenda 21 and its principles.

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/82563973/Ocean-County-NJ-resolution-against-Agenda-21>

June 13, 2012

Morris County freeholders unanimously adopt a resolution opposing Agenda 21.
<http://www.scribd.com/doc/98541712/FH-Minutes-2012-06-13>

July 31, 2012

An Agenda 21 event held at Farmstead Golf & Country Club in Andover, NJ attracts media attention after Gail Phoebus, a Republican Sussex County freeholder candidate left the event early along with other local officials who were angered by the radical message that came from the surprise speaker, Maggie Roddin.
<http://www.careersatquincy.com/story/19480024/phoebus-plans-legal-action-over-meeting>

Aug. 29, 2012

The G.O.P. party includes an anti-Agenda 21 plank in its platform:
“We strongly reject the U.N. Agenda 21 as erosive of American sovereignty, and we oppose any form of U.N. Global Tax.”
http://www.gop.com/2012-republican-platform_home/
<http://green.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/08/29/republican-platform-opposes-agenda-21/>

Aug. 30, 2012

As reported on NJHerald.com, Sussex County freeholder director Phil Crabb said a resolution opposing Agenda 21, similar to a resolution unanimously adopted by the Morris County freeholders in June, would be scheduled for a discussion and possible vote.

Sept. 8, 2012

As reported on NJHerald.com, Sussex County freeholder director Phil Crabb said he would not submit a resolution opposing UN Agenda 21.

Nov. 29, 2012

The Frelinghuysen, NJ town council votes to cut ties with Sustainable Jersey after testimony from Sustainable Jersey co-director Randall Solomon and speaker John Anthony.

Dec. 3, 2012

As reported in the Delaware News Journal, [“Tea party devotees refocusing on growth issues”](#)

Dec. 26, 2012

A [New York Times article](#) reports that people aligned with Tea Party thinking will turn from broad national issues to focus on state and local issues, including Agenda 21.