

GOPs' Pledge to America ignores the property rights' issue

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=4683>

The GOP's "Pledge to America" addresses many of the issues that have led to the financial and political crises that is plaguing our country, and it is looking more and more like the Republicans are going to sweep the House and the Senate in the midterm elections.

But for all its good points, it is disconcerting that word "property" does not appear anywhere in its text. Though it does discuss promoting liberty, it does not specifically address the trend toward loss of property rights, without which the Constitution and the Bill of Rights simply do not work.

Not only have we taken for granted the right for us to own property and to keep the property that is the fruit of our labors, we have no practical knowledge of what life is like when property, especially land, cannot be owned in perpetuity.

Owen McShane, in his article in the Newgeography.com website entitled "Why We Have to Learn to Love the Subdivision Again", wrote about land reforms that took place in Peru in the 1980's. He wrote "...Hernando DeSoto and the Institute for Land and Democracy promoted land reforms that led to more than 1.2 million rural families being given titles to the land they worked. One major grant of titles to a whole village was celebrated on television. When the reporter asked a woman "Why is having title important for your family?" She replied, "Having secure title means I can now go out to work." She went on to explain that the family's past "customary settlement" required continual occupancy and eternal vigilance. Some member of the family had to be on the property at all times, or else someone else could move in."

This is one reason why people in countries that do not have property rights will not evacuate their land during a disaster that endangers their lives. Leaving their property means that it is fair game for someone to take possession of it while they are away.

In America, suburbs have been the preferred living arrangement at least as early as the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. But the loudest voices are saying that we must stop building suburbs and concentrate on dense development, that the recent housing bubble burst means that home ownership is not for everyone, perhaps not even for the majority.

But not everyone believes that. Author Joel Kotkin writes, "Yet for all the problems facing the housing market, homeownership - not exclusively single-family homes - is not likely to fade dramatically for the foreseeable future. The most compelling reason has to do with continued public preference for single-family homes, suburbs and the notion of owning a "piece" of the American dream. This is why four out of every five homes built in America over the past few decades, notes urban historian Witold Rybczynski, have less to do with government policy than with buyer's preferences, that is, What People Want."

More surprising is who wants that American dream. Proponents of dense development would have us believe that the demographic to design to is the youngest adult generation, who according to proponents, aren't interested in suburbia. But according to Kotkin, "As boomers age, the two big groups that will drive housing will be the young Millennial generation born after 1983 as well as immigrants and their offspring. Sixty million strong, the millennials are just now entering their late 20s...Generational chroniclers Morely Winograd and Mike Hais, describe millennials in their surveys as family-oriented young people who value homeownership even more than their boomer parents. They are also more likely to choose suburbia as their "ideal place to live" than the previous generation.

Although PlaniTulsa conceded that Tulsan's love their single-family homes, much of it centered on the notion that the demographics of that generation would be TINKs (two incomes, no kids), and that the strong demand for housing would be downtown and/or transit-oriented developments, and that to attract and retain young talented professionals, Tulsa needs to focus its development on those models.

Indeed we do need to prevent a brain drain of talent from Tulsa. There is no question that professionals and skilled workers are critical to Tulsa's economy. But the basic human need for freedom, along with America's deep roots in property ownership, does not diminish from one generation to another.

For all of our talk about sustainability, it seems we are pursuing the least sustainable model. If, in fact, our goal is to retain talent, then perhaps allowing people to own the kind of property they choose to own would be a good place to start, even if it is in a suburb.

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