

## Department raises concerns

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=1211#more-1211>

Within a week of the presidential election, it was announced that the Obama-Biden Administration would be opening a new department at the White House, the “Office of Urban Policy.”

At this point there is scant detail about what that means, but according to a report issued by Architect Online, there was this statement available on Obama’s website prior to the election:

“Cities enable the concentrated exchange of ideas and resources that generates the nation’s innovation and entrepreneurship. Particularly in the knowledge economy, we cannot afford to waste any of the human capital, real estate and business assets of cities... Today, government programs aimed at strengthening metropolitan areas are spread across the federal government...with insufficient coordination or strategy. Obama and Biden will create a White House Office of Urban Policy to develop a strategy for metropolitan America and to ensure that all federal dollars targeted to urban areas are effectively spent on the highest-impact programs.”

According to the same article, the new department was not mentioned in Obama’s “Blueprint for Change” but was mentioned in a speech he delivered to the U.S. Conference of Mayors in Miami this year, a group that has been heavily involved in promoting sustainable development and New Urbanism in American cities.

Where does this leave rural America and America’s small towns? According to Obama’s website, he is committed to helping family farms and “rural areas continue their leadership in the renewable fuels movement” but it also appears that his commitment to “rural communities” (does this mean small towns?) involves subsidizing improvements in health care, education and communications.

According to Obama’s Blueprint, he is committed to the concept of “affordable housing” (a euphemism for subsidized housing). It says, “Communities prosper when all families have access to affordable housing. It undermines both families and businesses when low-income families are priced out of the market. Regions then face a ‘jobs-housing mismatch’ as employees cannot afford to live near where they work. Businesses, in turn, have higher workforce costs and some local governments cannot attract teachers, firefighters and other public servants who cannot afford to live in their communities. Between 1993 and 2003, the number of affordable to low-income households fell by 1.2 million. Barack Obama has strongly supported efforts to create an Affordable Housing Trust Fund to develop affordable housing in mixed-income neighborhoods. The Affordable Housing Trust Fund would use a small percentage of the profits of two government-sponsored housing agencies, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, to create thousands of new units of affordable housing every year.”

Many architects are apparently ecstatic that the new Office of Urban Policy will give them an opportunity to be involved in planning issues more than in previous issues. One article I read compared it to Chicago’s Mayor Daley, saying, “...Daley’s success can be attributed to his

sensitivity to architecture and design issues. He hasn't marginalized them, as other mayors have, shunting them off to lower-level aides. He's made such issues a key part of his administration, personally reviewing major projects himself. At one point, in the mid-1990's, he had three architects in his cabinet..."

But remember, Mayor Daley was the one who sent bulldozers onto Meigs Field, Chicago's small downtown airport, in the middle of the night to destroy it, claiming it was done for security reasons and breaking federal laws with impunity. He later turned it into a park, and surprise, has said that it will play a big part in Chicago's bid for the 2016 Olympics. Daley reportedly contends that Obama will be good for cities.

In view of the financial crisis caused by the "affordable housing" debacle, Obama needs to re-think his entire platform of urban policy, but looking between the cracks of his campaign planks, there is a strong commitment to developing cities under New Urbanistic principles, with little to no commitment to small towns in America. It appears at the moment that his concept of America is big cities with mixed-income neighborhoods, with the rest of America producing food and energy.

The remaining question is, how far is he willing to go to install the policies that the Office of Urban Policy demands, and will it require the proverbial bulldozer?

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This entry was posted on Thursday, December 4th, 2008 and is filed under [Columns](#).