

Environmentalists want your property

Anchorage Mayor Mark Begich was criticized for weighing in on "state" issues. Mayor Rick Mystrom was criticized for concentrating on neighborhoods and ignoring state issues. Mayor Tom Fink was criticized for ignoring neighborhoods and focusing on federal issues. So, what's a busy mayor to do?

The smartest mayors cover all the bases, because politicians are involved. And, unless you've been living on the dark side of the moon, you know what politicians do — they find creative ways to spend other people's money. Even though they live elsewhere, they can still dramatically affect a town's budget.

Working on government policy issues in the 1990s, I learned that virtually every federal or state mandate falls on our hometowns to implement. That's where the action is. Well, not exactly. The final action occurs when we pay more taxes for the mandates all these levels of government decide are good for us.

Want the last part per million of arsenic removed from your drinking water? Pay for it. Want to save the kangaroo rat? Buy a home in Riverside County, Calif., and add \$1,950 per acre to the price to fund a \$100 million rat preserve. Or, if you want a home near Austin, Texas, pay a land trust \$1,500 to manage an endangered toad's habitat.

In Southern Arizona, you'll pay an additional \$7,000 to \$12,000 for a building lot to fund 1.2 million acres of habitat for the pygmy owl. In San Bernardino County, officials spent \$3.3 million relocating a medical center to avoid a sand pit supposedly visited by an endangered fly. Colton, Calif., which couldn't site a sports complex because of the fly, says it and other species have cost the city 20,000 jobs in just a decade.

Topping the list of laws that originally sounded good but today destroy peo-

PAULA
EASLEY

COMMENT



5-2-04
ple's lives and livelihoods are those governing protection of endangered fish and other species. They are also the most vivid examples of what happens when you pour oil on a slippery slope. There is no way to climb back up. Although many lawmakers recognize this, there's not a one alive who knows how to negotiate the slope.

As new species are listed and habitat restrictions imposed, more citizens are damaged. Property owners lose rights to their land if an endangered woodpecker comes to visit, but the people who got the woodpecker listed lose nothing; in fact, they gain power, money and prestige.

If you think an endangered "something" is waiting in the wings for the next Alaska development proposal, you're right. As of December 2003, 1,260 species of plants, bugs, birds, fish and animals were on the federal threatened or endangered list. More than 3,000 more are "candidates," in case some greedy human might consider turning over a shovel of sacred dirt.

Environmentalists and their lawmaker allies care little about the costs of endangered species rules. Unfortunately, few city or county officials document their costs or know the extent of lost opportunities to their economy from endangered species policies. They just keep losing taxes, jobs and other economic benefits when land and waters can't be used. As taxable land shrinks, housing, community infrastructure

Environmentalists and their lawmaker allies care little about the costs of endangered species rules.

and entrepreneurial ventures can only become more costly.

Many local officials don't realize environmentalists' ultimate goal: eliminating resource extraction, agriculture and humans from rural land, and turning it back to "nature" and wildlife. This, of course, requires policies and land-use planning that force citizens into urban areas.

The secret is getting our hands on the land. If developers want land, they pay for it. Environmental deal-makers prefer getting government to fund it (with our tax dollars). Armed with "charitable" tax status, these groups accumulate land and money tax-free, again forcing taxpayers to subsidize their activities. Donors also get tax breaks for granting conservation easements and agreeing not to develop their land.

Without major changes, government and land trusts will soon control when, where, how and if essential resources will be produced from "their" lands. Groups such as The Nature Conservancy will be the new land barons, and the rest of us might even enjoy becoming their serfs.

It may take a while before outraged citizens are able to undo the damage wrought by our arrogance and stupidity in giving nonhuman species such elevated legal status. I just hope we're smart enough for the challenge.

■ Paula Easley is an Anchorage public policy consultant and former executive director of the Resource Development Council. She can be reached at paulaeasley@yahoo.com.