



New Partners for Smart Growth, 7th Annual Conference

Steve Dubb, Democracy Collaborative, University of Maryland

www.community-wealth.org

Conference Aims to Consolidate Smart Growth Principles in Public Policy

More than 1,200 people attended the New Partners for Smart Growth 7th annual conference, which was held from February 7th through February 9th in Washington, DC. The three-day event, organized by the Sacramento, CA-based Local Government Commission, brought together a wide range of smart growth advocates including elected officials, transportation professionals, urban planners, community wealth builders, foundation officials, and environmentalists to discuss the latest developments and develop a common policy agenda to further their work.

At the conference, it was clear that the movement is reaching a crossroads of sorts, a theme that was repeatedly raised at the conference's daily plenary panels. On the one hand, "smart growth" principles are more and more seen as the "new common sense" of urban growth and development. On the other hand, urban policy is still a backwater in the political arena and, in general, the public policy environment has only begun to catch up with the thinking of urban, transportation, and community development leaders and activists.

Adrien Fenty, Mayor of Washington, DC, noted that the zeitgeist does favor increased attention to environmental concerns within development projects. "People in DC are demanding that government and the private sector be prudent and conserve the environment as much as humanly possible," Fenty said. In response, the city government has instituted a number of "green" development policies. Fenty pointed out that the new Washington Nationals baseball stadium is "the first LEED certified stadium in the country." LEED, which stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, is a nationally recognized standard for environmental design that has been adopted by the U.S. Green Building Council. Fenty also stated that, "DC has one of the strongest green building codes in the country. By 2012, private sector will be covered for all large buildings. All [new] publicly owned building must be green right away... We are trying to set a high standard not just for ourselves but the nation."

Senator Mary Landrieu (D-LA) and Representative Earl Blumenauer (D-OR) also spoke at the first day's conference plenary. Blumenauer argued that the federal government should make use of its purchasing power to change building practices nationally. "We're the nation's largest landlord, its largest landowner and employer," Blumenauer noted. "We have 300 million square feet of office space... We ought to make a commitment that by 2011 that the federal government is not going to build or lease any building that is not green triple-platinum. It would help bring these practices to scale. This is not as hard as we make it out to be." Landrieu noted that state government practices in Louisiana in a similar direction had led to major changes in development patterns. "It is transformative what has occurred in Baton Rouge," Landrieu said.

“The state has decided to keep all of its buildings concentrated, keeping our downtown, bringing synergy and energy to a place.”

The conference’s second day plenary focused on the relationship between smart growth principles and the need to deal with the environmental threat posed by climate change. Panel moderator Barbara McCann of the National Complete Streets Coalition noted, for instance, that without changes in development patterns, legislation that seeks to increase car and truck fuel economy will have a negligible effect on environmental quality. “Even with new [fuel economy] standards, we’ll be running in place unless we do something about driving,” McCann noted. “It is projected that there will be a 159 percent increase in driving over the next 25 years.”

Steve Winkelman, Transportation Program Director at the Center for Clean Air Policy, concurred. “It’s clear that we need to slow growth in travel,” Winkelman said. “We’re projected to travel 50 percent more. If we could reduce that by two-thirds, that would mean a 4 percent reduction nationally or a fuel savings of \$250 billion. That’s the equivalent of half the savings of [improved fuel economy standards]. So we need a 20-25 percent reduction in per capita vehicle miles traveled (VMT) by 2035.”

James Goldstone, Executive Officer of the California Air Resources Board, and Judy Corbett, Executive Director of the Local Government Commission, both addressed climate change regulation in the state of California. Goldstone indicated that “a scoping plan to make California achieve reductions by 2020 equivalent to 1990 levels” should be released by the end of June. Corbett pointed to the vital role that local governments will play in realizing these goals. “Jerry Brown, who is now California’s Attorney General,” Corbett noted, “sued San Bernardino County for not considering global warming in its Environmental Impact report. That woke up local government. Local government is now responsible for allowing us to meet the requirement ... and it will be the biggest thing to push forward smart growth.”

Jeanne Hoffman, Sustainable Transportation and Climate Change Lead for the Seattle Department of Transportation, outlined a four-point approach that the City of Seattle is taking to reduce carbon emissions. As Hoffman put it, these parts are: 1) reduce dependence on cars through smart growth strategies, 2) promote clean cars, 3) promote clean energy generation and transmission, and 4) mobilize the entire community. Among specific action steps, Seattle has set a goal of having “transit service at least every 15 minutes, at least 18 hours a day” and has implemented a parking tax to discourage driving.

The two plenary sessions on the last day of the conference both focused specifically on developing policy solutions to promote smart growth.

Chris Zimmerman of Arlington County (VA) Board, pointed out one policy problem: “Suburban transit agencies use transit stations as a place to store cars. That kills the most valuable space. The transit agencies don’t have control of the issue: federal rules say that if you get rid of parking spaces, you have to replace it. That makes it very hard to have several thousand people live there. We need to change rules like these. We need to focus on what are the obstacles and what can we do change the rules in a few specific places and show results.”

Gene Krebs, State Director of Greater Ohio, focused more on the need for a media strategy. Rather than more white papers, “I’d prefer a web-based video. Put it up on YouTube. Do humor, such as the Committee of People in Favor of Big Ugly Things.”

William Johnson, who was Mayor of Rochester, New York from 1994 to 2005, noted that “smart growth” might not be the right moniker for communities like his own, which have shrinking populations. “What we have in New York State is sprawl without growth. We have had an 80 percent increase in land use with a 1 percent increase in population. In the 2000 census there were 20,000 new housing units to accommodate 9,000 fewer residents in Monroe County. It is the American tendency to always want something new and better. We need a ‘smart decline’ movement – we need to look at it in the context of smart growth. Make this transition into an efficient and better planned way.”

Geoff Anderson, the new President and CEO of Smart Growth America and former head of the Environmental Protection Agency’s Smart Growth Program, noted that the key “problem is political will. We need to shift what we do to go into campaign mode. You got to pick what you want to change. We work on all of it. We’ve done such a good job building a broad coalition, but then we split up and work on our own problems. We need to focus on two or three issues every year and focus on the political will to make the change. That’s the fundamental reason I decided to leave EPA. I couldn’t do it there, so I came to Smart Growth America.”

The closing plenary reinforced these issues. Urban planner James Charlier recommend a focus on five areas: 1) accelerating increases in fleet efficiency, 2) making a reduction in vehicle miles traveled feasible through better transit and more walkable streets, 3) replacing the current policy circle of a “highway money machine” with a “transit money machine,” 4) stopping relying on the gas tax for infrastructure spending and 5) working to improve public health.

Mariia Zimmerman, Vice President for Policy at Reconnecting America and the Center for Transit-Oriented Development called for an effort to insert smart growth and transit-oriented development principles into the 2009 transportation bill reauthorization. What can be achieved? Zimmerman suggested the goal should be, “A strong statement that indicates that the role of transportation infrastructure is to reduce our dependency to oil, lower household transportation costs, reduce our carbon footprint, and provide mobility for everyone.” Such legislative language, Zimmerman said, could help set a tone nationwide for greater carbon emissions reduction and expanded public transportation in the years ahead.

For more information on the conference, including PowerPoint presentations from many of the sessions, see: <http://www.smartgrowth.org/newpartners/NPSG2008.asp>