

LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMISSION

A national, nonprofit, membership organization
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Note for reporters: During the event, please check in at the conference registration desk at the Key Ballroom Foyer of the Baltimore Hilton Hotel to obtain a media credential.

Changing climate, changing cities

Last night Obama called for action on climate change – next week leaders from across the nation will gather to explore strategies across all levels of government to increase resiliency

The American economy and local communities – big and small, urban and rural – across the country will face significant, widespread disruptions from climate change. Our health, safety and prosperity are threatened unless policymakers and businesses take immediate action to respond to and reduce climate risk.

“No challenge poses a greater threat to future generations than climate change,” President Obama said in his State of the Union address on Tuesday, describing its impacts as “immediate risks to our national security.”

Top presidential advisors on climate change will be discussing innovative public-private solutions to increase resiliency with local leaders from across the nation in Baltimore next week (Jan. 29-31) at the 14th annual New Partners for Smart Growth Conference.

Alice Hill, Senior Advisor for Preparedness and Resilience at the White House National Security Council Staff; Harriet Tregoning, Economic Resilience Director at the U.S. Office of Housing and Urban Development; Joel Beauvais, U.S. EPA Associate Administrator; and Kate Dineen, NY Rising Community Reconstruction Program Director for the New York Governor’s Office of Storm Recovery will discuss how businesses, governments and communities can work in the Friday morning plenary on “Building Resilience in the Face of Climate Risks.”

The New Partners conference – the largest and most comprehensive smart growth/resilient communities conference held in the U.S. – will explore the critical issues involved in safeguarding our communities and showcase practical tools and strategies for meeting this call to action.

In 2012 alone, extreme weather and natural disasters cost the American economy more than \$100 billion. Today, more extreme wildfires, storms, rising oceans and floods, longer, hotter heat waves and record-breaking drought are threatening lives and natural habitats and causing significant property damage. Just last week, climate experts at NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced that 2014 was Earth’s warmest year on record. In fact, 14 of the 15 warmest years on record have all fallen in the first 15 years of this century.

“Working together we can create a groundswell of change across the nation by tackling intractable challenges – from climate change to racial inequity – at the community level,” said Kate Meis, executive director of the Local Government Commission, which is organizing the conference. “It is at this level – closer to the problems – where innovative solutions for sparking economic growth, improving the community’s quality of life, and protecting the environment can be tested.”

Many communities face a range of challenges that, on their own, seem daunting. However, by bundling smart-growth strategies to create innovative solutions communities can address more than one challenge at a time. For example, green infrastructure investments can manage stormwater, improve the walkability of streets, help neighborhoods adapt to climate change, and attract private investment.

We are already seeing the different effects of climate change in regions across the nation. At the same time, we’re witnessing a broad menu of forward-thinking and effective responses, with communities discovering their economic and social well-being is inextricably linked to the ways they build and prepare for increased storm events and climate change.

The session on “Rising from the Storm: Turning Devastation into Opportunity for All” explores some of the ways in which communities – from a small Iowa city to New Orleans to states along the Atlantic coast – are seizing the opportunity to recover from major storms and increase resilience to future disasters, strengthen their economies, and protect their most vulnerable residents.

Floods and natural disasters can have devastating effects on the economic well-being of a community, with many businesses never reopening and the most vulnerable groups most hard-hit. In 2008, Linn County, Iowa,

was devastated by a flood that displaced 10,000 people, with the greatest impacts being felt among socially at-risk groups. Similarly, in the wake of Superstorm Sandy, Rhode Island has discovered its future economic health depends on its ability to integrate climate change into its economic development plans.

The “Collaborative Approaches to Catalyzing Climate-Adaptation Action” session will present several adaptation-collaboration case studies ranging from California’s Alliance of Regional Collaboratives for Climate Adaptation to the Great Lakes Adaptation Collaborative to the South East Florida Climate Compact to the City of Baltimore’s own efforts to coordinate with the state of Maryland, local, regional, state and federal stakeholders. These regional initiatives are finding ways to move forward by building new relationships across jurisdictional and institutional boundaries.

The scale and extent of climate-change impacts presents a planning issue for all levels of government that challenges existing scopes of responsibility at every level of government.

“In many cases, land-use planning authority is highly localized, while impacts are best addressed regionally or at the state level,” said Kif Scheuer, who leads the Local Government Commission’s climate change programs in California. “Responding to climate change requires key stakeholders to coordinate across jurisdictional boundaries at a much greater level than ever before.”

Smart growth isn’t truly smart if it isn’t safe. Many communities are learning this lesson as they face the challenge of developing in locations that are compact, walkable and less vulnerable to floods, sea-level rise, earthquakes and other natural hazards.

The “Smart Growth Can Be Safe Growth” session offers resilience successes from Vermont and California – two very different places that are working to become more resilient as they face the effects of climate change.

Communities in the Mad River Valley of Vermont, for example, are using a Flood Resilience Checklist to rebuild better after Tropical Storm Irene in 2011, while regional organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area are using practical strategies to reduce vulnerability to sea-level rise and earthquakes in priority development areas.

Expanding green infrastructure in most areas is another effective climate-change response that also addresses economic and social disparities in underserved communities.

The “Green Infrastructure for Regional Resilience and Equity” session explores the model of the Greater Baltimore Wilderness Coalition, which is working to conserve, restore and enhance a regional green infrastructure network to benefit people and wildlife. In 2014, the coalition received a Hurricane Sandy Coastal Resiliency Grant to focus on the role of green infrastructure in promoting resilience and equity.

There are also many new tools and affordable technologies coming online to help these community efforts. The conference’s implementation workshop on “Tools for Building Community Resilience to Coastal Hazards” offers some examples of strategies to help coastal communities strengthen resilience to flooding, storm surges and sea-level rise, which can endanger people, places and natural resources.

These communities face the challenge of identifying the degrees of risk posed by these hazards and determining where and how to accommodate new growth and development given those risks. Assessing a community’s risks and vulnerabilities to coastal hazards and climate change is an important process for creating a more resilient coastal community.

“Building climate responsive communities requires a deep level of engagement by people of all ages. Increasingly, there is individual interest in taking action, but a lack of structured outlets,” said Kristin Brubaker, project manager for the CivicSpark Americorps program. “Local governments are natural sites for this engagement, as they are well positioned to pilot solutions, but are limited by a lack of resources.”

To help fill that gap, the session on “Growing Innovation: Leveraging Service Programs for Smart-Growth Capacity” will describe several innovative service programs are producing community results and growing the next generation of sustainability and urban-planning leaders. These programs are built around connecting experienced professionals at different stages in their careers with local governments to catalyze action.

ABOUT THE CONFERENCE: With a dynamic mix of over 300 speakers and 80 sessions, the New Partners for Smart Growth conference will draw a national audience of more than 1,000 elected officials and government agency leaders as well as developers, builders, bankers, realtors, and advocates and professionals in planning, transportation, public health, landscape architecture, architecture, housing, parks and recreation, public works, crime prevention, education and the environment. For a full list of sponsors and more details about the conference agenda and special features: NewPartners.org

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