

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.

New Tools for Shaping Our Cities

National conference explores innovative technologies and practical strategies for improving communities today and planning for tomorrow

Digital tools and data-driven techniques have long been a part of the Electronic Age, but they're now becoming more ubiquitous in the way we plan, build and measure the cities and places where we live, work and play – and how we get from one place to the other while doing it.

The 14th annual New Partners for Smart Growth Conference – the largest and most comprehensive smart growth/resilient communities conference held in the U.S. – will convene in Baltimore this week (Jan. 29-31) to consider the dynamic opportunities and successful application of many of those new tools in addressing a full menu of social and economic challenges faced by communities across the country.

Underscoring a stronger emphasis on implementation support, the theme of this year's conference is focused on equipping participants to implement successful models and create their own entrepreneurial approaches through "Practical Tools and Innovative Strategies for Creating Great Communities."

Across more than a dozen subject tracks, the conference will feature numerous tools, strategies, focused trainings, experiential learning opportunities and new technologies that will help transform communities now.

This timely conference will offer the event's 1,000-plus participants illuminating opportunities to share innovative ideas and successful strategies from across the country that respond to our nation's most pressing community challenges and advance forward-thinking sustainability programs and policies.

"Working together we can create a groundswell of change across the nation by tackling challenges – from climate change to racial inequity – at the community level, where innovative solutions for sparking economic growth, improving the community's quality of life, and protecting the environment can be tested," said Kate Meis, executive director of the Local Government Commission, which is organizing the conference. "New tools and technology for increasing transparency, optimizing public services, and engaging community members will be a critical component to community innovation."

HANDS-ON TOOLS: A popular feature of the New Partners conference, the **Technology Fair** showcases cutting-edge tools for scenario-planning, opportunity mapping, crowdsourced planning, public engagement and community decision-making. At the interactive demonstrations, conference attendees can meet more than a dozen smart-planning tool and service providers, experiment with the tools hands-on, and see how they can be applied to challenges they face with projects they're working on in their communities.

OPEN TO SOLUTIONS: Cities across the nation are increasingly making municipal data available in an effort to catalyze innovative solutions to local challenges. The conference will explore this growing trend and its potential for creating imaginative new opportunities during a Saturday morning plenary based on the policy equation that "Open Data + Civic Hackers = New Technology for Age-Old Problems."

This new openness of information has allowed entrepreneurial residents to create apps that track crime, map abandoned property, find the closest transit stop with real-time arrival predictions, identify city parks, and find real-time information on parking availability and prices.

"Local governments are employing modern tools and approaches to solving problems and building, or buying technology to improve the lives of community residents, visitors and businesses," said Luke Norris, Government Relations Director at Code for America, and one of the plenary's speakers.

The plenary highlights local governments whose open-data initiatives have breed new community solutions and civic hackers who have seized on these community-innovation opportunities. Also on the panel are Sacramento Councilmember Steve Hanson; Thom Guertin, Rhode Island's Chief Digital Officer; Denise Taylor, Communications Director for Somerville, MA; and Debra Lam, the City of Pittsburgh's Chief Innovation and Performance Officer.

TRAINING WORKSHOPS AND SESSIONS FEATURING DYNAMIC TOOLS

More than 45 million Americans – and one in five children – live in poverty. To help explore these conditions, the conference has created “Understanding the Challenge: A Poverty Simulation Experience,” a unique, 3.5-hour eye-opening experiential setting that will help conference participants step into the shoes of low-income families, in trying to meet the daily challenges of providing food, shelter and basic necessities while dealing with “community resources.”

New Urbanist pioneer Andres Duany will provide insights about the use of practical tools for smart growth during one of the conference’s first training sessions – “Lean Urbanism: Restoring Common Sense to Get Things Done” – on Thursday afternoon (Jan. 29). Duany will discuss how our diminished circumstances and financial, bureaucratic and regulatory impediments call for a return to common sense in the processes of building, incubating small businesses, engaging the community, and acquiring the necessary skills. The Project for Lean Urbanism will provide tools for entrepreneurs who need help navigating complex requirements and governments seeking to streamline their processes.

How do some communities put their plans into motion and effectively redevelop neighborhoods, change land-use rules, and attract compact new development – while other plans languish and sit on shelves?

Those questions are answered in the tool workshop on “The Path to Implementation: Innovative Tools to Make Your Plans Happen,” which examines creative and interactive planning approaches, web tools and living documents that can help engage the community and bring a city’s plans to life. Among the tools are new apps for crowdsourcing data on transit connectivity, interactive design platforms and tools for collaborative decision-making.

Transportation tools get a close look at several conference sessions, including the “Building Blocks Training Academy Road Show.” The menu of local tools from the EPA’s Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities Program include walkability and parking audits, green streets strategies and a visioning exercise called “Preferred Growth Areas.”

Quality of place – such as parks that invite activity, sidewalks that foster social connectivity or urban food sources – is increasingly recognized as a significant factor in public health. However, it’s often hard to gather information that help cities understand these connections and the health impacts of their community planning decisions. In a session on “Tools for Healthy Places,” the conference examines several tools, such as Health Impact Assessments, that can help incorporate health considerations into community decisions.

The conference program also covers a spectrum of practical smart-growth programs and policies, including green infrastructure to improve equity in underserved communities; new analytic fiscal tools that demonstrate how land-use factors drive costs and impact revenues; tools proven to eliminate blight; tools for building community resilience to coastal hazards; community land trusts to prevent residential displacement; tools to help communities with determining the best sites for new schools; and Health Impact Assessments and other techniques to help incorporate health considerations into community planning decisions.

The theme of innovative strategies will also be on display through the conference’s dozen tours of local model projects and indoor parklet installations, which demonstrate how a parking spot-sized space can transform into exciting opportunities for creating more vibrant places in the community.

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 1,200 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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