

LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMISSION

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Burgeoning Role of Smart Growth in Addressing Challenges

National conference examines the burgeoning role of smart growth in addressing the challenges of our day.

Ten or fifteen years ago, smart growth was just an emerging concept – one that had gained footing in but a few progressive places around the country. Today, the Smart Growth vision – of communities where walking, biking, and transit offer convenient and appealing ways for people to get from here to there – is attracting increased interest. And increasingly, research is revealing Smart Growth as a tool for addressing many of the economic, social and environmental problems faced by our states and communities today.

For instance, a new report released by the Center for Clean Air Policy last month warns that if sprawling, auto-dependent development continues, there will be a 59% increase in driving along with all the associated problems – poor air quality, the declining health of our population, increased traffic congestion, and a major increase in the CO2 emissions fueling global warming. However, if we were to turn to the compact, mixed use, walkable development called for under Smart Growth, global warming would be slowed, the populations' health would improve, and our national fuel expenditures would be cut by \$24 billion in 2030 – a \$250 billion savings on a cumulative basis.

According to Judy Corbett, executive director of the Local Government Commission which is hosting the conference, “Smart growth may have originated among planners and architects, but today it is attracting a truly diverse range of interests – from doctors concerned about health to police officers focused on public safety. Together, they understand the critical role that smart growth must play in addressing everything from global climate change to the economic health of individual communities.

State Efforts to Promote Smart Growth

A few leading states now recognize the need to coordinate their departments and agencies that impact growth and development, and have addressed this by creating or supporting an Office of Smart Growth.

For instance, the State of Maryland, under Governor O'Malley, has provided the State's Office of Smart Growth further exposure and responsibility in ensuring that diverse actions in departments from agriculture to general services are talking and matching interests through the state's Smart Growth Cabinet.

In December 2007, New York Governor Eliot Spitzer signed an Executive Order creating a Smart Growth Cabinet. The Cabinet will review state agency spending and policies to determine how best to discourage sprawl and promote smart land use practices. It will coordinate cross-agency activities and develop “smart growth” policies that cater to New York's unique regional needs.

The Cabinet will consist of high-level policy-makers from various state agencies that have an impact on growth and development patterns, including representatives from the Empire State Development

Corporation, Department of Environmental Conservation, Department of Transportation, Department of State, and Department of Housing and Community Renewal, among others.

Other states, such as Wisconsin, have passed Smart Growth legislation. The Wisconsin law requires all local governments that make land-use decisions to have a comprehensive plan by January 1, 2010. Smart Growth creates a nine-element definition of a comprehensive plan that requires each community to address: issues and opportunities; housing; transportation; utilities and community facilities; agricultural, natural and cultural resources; economic development; intergovernmental cooperation; land use and implementation.

The California Energy Commission and California Air Resources Board, the entities in charge of implementing Governor Schwarzenegger's climate change initiatives, believe that they will be unable to meet the Governor's CO₂ emission reduction goals without turning to smart growth. State agencies are now being asked to assure that state grants and loans to local government do not support urban sprawl.

With "change" the political watchword of the year, smart growth strategies are increasingly taking center-stage as practical solutions to a wide range of thorny environmental and economic problems. The emergence of smart growth – and its future – will get a closer look in Washington, DC, this month at the nation's premier smart growth conference, when over 1,200 participants will attend the 7th annual "New Partners for Smart Growth" conference on February 7-9.

The conference reflects how the smart growth movement has evolved from its first seeds in the "sustainability" movement of the 1970's through the "stop growth" agenda of the 1980's to its current iteration of implemented smart growth principles and sustainability policies adopted by many communities around the country.

Conference speakers from diverse professions will assess threats and opportunities, and offer action items for implementers who seek to move smart growth from "cutting-edge" to "business-as-usual."

Taking Smart Growth to Capitol Hill

In conjunction with this year's conference, smart growth advocates from around the country will take their message to Capitol Hill. On the conference's Advocacy Day, set for Wednesday, February 6 (1:30-5:30 p.m. ET), advocates will visit with their representatives to talk about key smart growth issues facing the 110th Congress.

"It's a great chance for local leaders to support a smart growth agenda in Congress," said Corbett. "These visits will underscore the connection between public health and the built environment, and encourage further support for current legislation that helps develop healthier living environments that promote physical activity, pedestrian and neighborhood safety, economic health and clean air and water."

Elected officials, including Congressman Earl Blumenauer from Oregon; Senator Mary Landrieu from Louisiana; Congressman Mike Turner from Ohio; and Congressman James Oberstar from Minnesota will headline a plenary to discuss what Capitol Hill is doing to implement smart growth. Each of these leaders has been instrumental in forwarding the national understanding and comprehension of smart growth. Blumenauer has been a long-time advocate of livable communities and global warming. Landrieu has been a strong advocate for coastal issues and affordable housing. Oberstar was a chief architect of recent transportation authorization, which focused on transit as key element for smart growth.

Spurred by the Senate's Smart Growth Task Force and the House Livable Communities Task Force, a forum exists for best practices and innovative solutions to be heard and discussed on the legislative floors. These ideas come in the form of hearings, committee reports and legislation on topics such as climate change, energy independence, affordable housing, transportation reauthorization, community reinvestment, preservation of natural resources, and investment in infrastructure. These leaders will share their accomplishments and outline their vision for the future.

The three-day conference will feature 300 speakers, more than 100 sessions and 14 tours of local model projects. Conference sponsors include the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Kaiser Permanente, the National Association of REALTORS®, Smart Growth Network, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. For more details about the agenda, speakers, sponsors and tours: www.newpartners.org

The Local Government Commission is a 28-year-old nonprofit membership organization of locally elected officials, city and county staff, and other interested individuals. It helps local officials address the problems facing their communities and maximize their civic, environmental and economic resources. The Ahwahnee Principles for Livable Communities, developed by the LGC in 1991, helped pave the way for the smart growth movement.

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