

Like a Good Neighbor, GSA Is There

In 1996, the GSA established the Good Neighbor Program (GNP), a public-private partnership with downtown associations, which combines federal muscle and local infrastructure to revitalize urban areas. GSA traditionally manages real estate and procurements for civilian federal agencies. Under the GNP program, GSA becomes a full participant in local business improvement districts—areas created by local property owners to increase local tax revenue—by negotiating contracts for security and maintenance, as well as participating in advisory boards and committees.

“Each GSA office building, laboratory or courthouse is a symbol of our democracy; each is a significant public investment, an investment that must contribute to the vitality of its neighborhood community,” says Robert Peck, commissioner of GSA’s Public Building Service, which oversees the GNP.

Of course the GSA gets something out of this too: It improves the work environments for many federal workers, many of whom work in downtown offices. In fact, more than 90 percent of the agency’s 1,800 buildings and 6,200 lease locations are in urban areas, most in urban centers. After all, the organization’s main purpose is “to improve the effectiveness of the federal government by ensuring quality work environments for its employees.” Its in their own best interest to keep their buildings an active part of the community and to keep its employees happy. The side effect is that by

improving, for example, transportation to or security around a downtown federal office, the surrounding urban area improves as well.

“Through [this program], we will partner actively with local communities and be out in front in making sure our public buildings do spur smart growth and community vitality,” says Hillary Levitt, an urban designer and director of the Center of Expertise for Urban Development and Livability, which provides support for GSA’s livable community actions, including Good Neighbor. “Where we can meet agencies’ needs in ways that foster livable communities, we mean to do so.”

Since its inception three years ago, the Good Neighbor Program has opened downtown federal buildings to the public by encouraging communities to use ground-floor and plaza spaces for public activities and events, stores and restaurants. The GSA has played host to 5,000 community events nationwide. In Baltimore, several hundred jobs were retained and more than 500 new federal jobs added when the GSA began working with the city’s development association. A new federal building and improved public transportation created an office and retail corridor in a fading part of Oakland, Calif. And the GSA partnered with Tacoma, Wash., to convert its sagging, historic Union Railroad Station into a federal courthouse, spurring development throughout the surrounding neighborhood, including a new museum and university.