

BY SUSAN CONBERE

GETTING TO SMART GROWTH: TOOLS FOR MANAGERS

Better results lead to a better quality of life

Local government officials in the United States who are interested in environmentally and economically sound growth attended the New Partners for Smart Growth Conference in San Diego, California, during February 2012. Officials at the conference attested that creating a development plan that a community can support, finding the funding, and then implementing the plan are formidable challenges, but the results are worth the effort.

Growth that makes the most of a town's special assets and reflects the desires of the people who live and work there strengthens the economy and the sense of community and leads to a better quality of life.

Here are some of the lessons shared by public officials from communities big and small:

Involve your community from the get-go. Getting public input on community plans helps build public support, which can be important when projects are competing against other budget priorities. Visioning sessions using maps, building blocks, computerized images, and real-life props to show residents how their streets and neighborhoods can look help make the possibilities concrete.

One community blocked off a real street; used tape to mark off new street lines, potted plants to illustrate trees, and a stop sign to show changes in traffic patterns; then invited the community in to comment.

Involve all the community, not just the usual players. Business, youth, elderly, minorities, and disabled all need a voice at the table. Try holding listening sessions in the evening or on weekends at community centers, schools, assisted living facilities, and places of worship.

Share information at community fairs, farmers markets, and other local events. A "pizza, beer, and transit" meeting was a big hit in one town.

Reach out in traditional ways, but extend your efforts using social media, including Facebook, Twitter, and blogs. Translate materials for residents who don't speak English. Include translators and interpreters for the deaf.

Success breeds success. If funding is limited, start with one high-visibility project that starts the ball rolling. The small town of Lake Village, Arkansas, restored its historic town hall. The restored building brought all of the town's agencies under one roof, cutting the cost of renting and equipping multiple offices, and the new town hall became a center for community activity. The building was such a success, it attracted significant private sector investment to renovate other buildings nearby.

Create new partnerships. One initiative that can help is the Partnership for Sustainable Communities. A collaboration of Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Housing and Urban Development, and Department of Transportation, the partnership coordinates federal investments in infrastructure, facilities, and technical assistance to help communities get better results from their investments in growth and development. Visit www.sustainablecommunities.gov to quickly access grant and technical assistance opportunities and other resources from the three agencies.

Beyond federal, state, and local governments, look for help from foundations (particularly local foundations), community groups, businesses, and such associations as the National Association of Development Organizations.

Take advantage of tools and technical assistance. Every community wants funding, but in these challenging times, many grant programs have been cut back or eliminated. Don't overlook other forms of assistance that can help your community find its path to a more sustainable future.

Here are ideas from EPA's Office of Sustainable Communities, online at www.epa.gov/smartgrowth:

Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities. EPA and private sector experts provide targeted technical assistance to help communities implement such smart growth tools as walkability assessments and parking audits.

Smart Growth Implementation Assistance. National experts provide technical assistance for policy analysis (for example, reviewing state and local codes and transportation policies) or public participatory processes (for example, visioning and design workshops).

Greening America's Capitals. A design team produces schematic designs for revitalizing a neighborhood in a capital city.

Governors' Institute on Community Design. National experts provide technical assistance on a growth and development issue to a governor and the governor's policy advisers.

Smart Growth Tools. Many tools are available, including a water quality scorecard, a mixed-use trip generation model, and dozens of publications with case studies, best practices, and lessons learned. **PM**



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