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NATIONAL CONVERSATION ON THE FUTURE OF OUR COMMUNITIES

The National Conversation on the Future of Our Communities is about smart growth and equitable development. Nationally, people in communities are working together to build smart, livable, healthy communities through sustainable land use and sustainable development of under-utilized and under-developed properties. A critical facet of this discussion and the progress we make on community inclusion and broad based economic prosperity involves ensuring that all communities including low income communities and disadvantaged communities of color are prioritized and included in the transition to the new, green global economy.

In his first year in office, President Obama made significant commitment to change which translates into new national direction. He committed the nation to a sustainable future that incorporates environmental quality for everyone and embarking on a new energy future; a green energy future with far-reaching societal and ecological benefits.

Together this means that we as a nation are on the precipice, at the very beginning of defining sustainability. As a matter of public policy and federal investments, (in no small part due to the perfect storm of climate change) we the people are in a national conversation about how going forward this nation will grow and develop sustainably. Without a doubt, if we don’t get it right this time, we’ll stay mired in the same decisions and mistakes that got us to:

- peak oil;
- climate change;
- environmental degradation;
- chronic unemployment that is staggering both the middle class and people who are challenged by low incomes;
- chronic minority health disparities;
- the credit crisis – which arguably began in communities of color; and
- accelerating poverty rates.

Distressed neighborhoods and people who live and work there must be prioritized for inclusion in the new green economy. New economy decisions must reflect the importance of revitalizing disadvantaged places and creating wealth as well the connectivity between sustainable economic development, the environment and health.

Sustainability involves more than renewable energy and conservation of resources. The definition of sustainable and the new green economy must incorporate the environmental and energy efficiency goals which most of us associate with the newly fashionable and very much media-hyped notion of green – setting and achieving social, health and economic goals is included.
Under the conventional approach, sustainability and greening refer to eco-efficiency – that’s cost-savings and resource conservation. Under a sustainable communities definition, equity is integral to sustainability – we can’t have one without the other. Plugging into the green economy by spreading the benefits of green buildings and energy efficiency, job creation, green jobs, stimulating entrepreneurship and access to opportunity – these are all important components of sustainability.

We need a new national working paradigm that gets beyond the mechanics of development. Equitable development is the social, economic and environmental pathway that will get us there. The key to sustainability is making certain that historically disadvantaged communities are prioritized and connected with the benefits of the new, green economy.

So, how do we factor in smart growth? Well, first, let’s look at the 10 Principles of Smart Growth which read well, speaking to a variety of sound objectives, among them:

- stakeholder collaboration
- creating housing choices
- walk-ability

As a proposition, smart growth is aspirational, a goal that society should be working towards. Actualizing smart growth means expanding the smart growth networks to widen involvement and engagement of the community sector – workers, renters, property owners, community development corporations, businesses, elected officials, faith based groups, civic and environmental justice organizations – those who comprise the local community. It also means expanding access to decision makers and expanding availability of resources by extending them to organizations and nonprofits working on place-based projects as well as state, regional and national equitable growth and development policies and investments.

Much – not all – but much of the smart growth and redevelopment conversation nationally and the place-based projects around the country reflect market-based thinking about challenging sprawl and preserving green space. For better or for worse, in the minds of many people -- the moniker for smart growth is mixed use transit oriented development – the antidote to sprawl. In another word – infill – the four-letter word for lots of community sector stakeholders that means exclusively real estate market-driven development.

Community stakeholders are not anti-market, nor are they proponents of sprawl. But they do know that market forces alone will not ameliorate the public and private sector disinvestments which financed and subsidized sprawl. Market forces alone will not address the environmental, health, economic and social disparities in neighborhoods aggravated by sprawl. There will never be enough fancy, smart growth, subway-centered mixed-use developments to address the extent of under-served urban core, inner ring suburban and rural places around this nation – places where land uses,
zoning and the shift in jobs and resources to the farther and farther out suburbs gave rise to distressed neighborhoods.

Smart growth at the community level is about re-development and re-building our communities – not just the bricks and mortar – really, rebuilding the fabric of our communities in places where there is a lot of redevelopment catching up to do. Sprawl has disinvested inner ring suburbs and rural areas with consequences as dire as cities and towns that are under-capitalized or market-challenged and our older cities. Additionally, many small cities and towns and rural places are being left behind in the transition to the new, green economy similar to what’s happening in urban neighborhoods that don’t have the low-hanging fruit that many developers are looking for.

Race and class are firmly embedded in the smart growth equation because it’s critical to understand and problem-solve the serious implications that must be addressed in the context of identifying and meeting the needs of historically distressed communities, in terms of framing redevelopment projects and outcomes and, ultimately, in terms of the long-term sustainability of redevelopment efforts.

Equitable development connects the dots between community revitalization, community interests and needs, planning and decisions that address inequities. Equity is the lens through which smart growth can contribute to addressing persistent problems that stymie prosperity – problems of:

- poverty, unemployment
- racism
- segregation
- redlining
- lack of affordable housing
- lack of access to transportation
- pollution and crime
- disease and ill-health
- bad schools and economic isolation.

People of color and people with low incomes will continue to be hurt if they remain disconnected from health and wealth-building opportunities. The new, green economy is our next best chance and the time is now. There’s ample evidence that society-at-large – that’s everybody – bears the cost of negative pressures and impacts in our neighborhoods. Financially and socially, everyone bears some of those costs as long as impacts and disparities go unaddressed. So nationally there is a lot at stake too.

The growth that’s truly smart recognizes who bears the societal burdens and who achieves the benefits. We need to see through the equity lens as we evaluate options, set public policy and, ultimately, plan, design and redevelop. If we’re really smart, we’ll change the maxim in western society that the benefits accrue to those with the most resources and the burdens fall on those with fewer resources.

The task before us is formidable but not impossible. In far too many places, market forces and demographics are daunting. Throw in the economic downturn, the explosion
of foreclosures and the credit crisis and the picture is clear and unpleasant. There is a lot of hard work to do.

Equitable development includes and factors in the interests and views and needs of people who live, work, own businesses, learn and play in that redeveloping neighborhood. Equitable development centers the community – involves the community – engages the community – in redevelopment planning and decisions. There are benefits to taking advantage of the capacity of the entire community not just the decision makers and the powerful. Community leadership, engaging and involving people results in better, smarter development.

Development that doesn’t factor in the people and community needs is not sustainable. People who live and work in the community – those who lived and held on through the decades of disinvestments – are the front line stakeholders. Their values and choices matter. The equitable way to grow smartly is a new framework and paradigm; a new more progressive direction beginning with a commitment to revitalization, new policy mandates and the investment of sufficient resources. There is substance in a process of bottom-up, community visioning and planning that positions the community to address key issues and challenges tied to community priorities.

Gentrification is the double edged sword of benefits and burdens that often accompanies smart growth redevelopment. Smart growth must deal with upfront in a planning process that intends to broaden the economic, social, health and environmental benefits while minimizing the burdens of the existing community such as decimation of cultural and historical resources, destruction of the sense of place and involuntary displacement. Without community engagement, lots more people than reasonable are being involuntarily displaced as a result of infill redevelopment.

It’s routine to measure neighborhood improvement without asking whether the improvement comes at the expense or culture of people who already live and work, own and rent properties and own businesses there. It’s a perverse result that is frequently associated with smart growth in the minds of people in the community. When the neighborhood declined, people were denied mortgages by biased banks, federal lenders and insurers or they were too poor to afford a home. Small businesses faced the same bias. Stigma and blight attached to the community.

Now comes the real estate renaissance when markets will be booming again. Evidence of the area’s history and culture will fade. The working poor, people with lower incomes and fixed incomes like the elderly won’t be able to afford to pay the rents and taxes or sales prices if they want to stay. Inclusionary zoning, first-hire ordinances and other useful devices simply aren’t providing affordable housing or jobs ample enough for all the people who want to stay.

To a greater or lesser degree all of us are stakeholders in redevelopment. Smart growth has got to contribute to redefining neighborhood improvement in ways that give people the means to stay where they have lived rich lives. We ought to be able to
attract new residents and investments without making it impossible for current residents, property owners and business proprietors who want to stay.

There’s a growing menu of public policies, strategies and approaches that capitalize on the community and preservation of culture and diversity; for example, historic preservation, land banking, land trusts and enforceable local workforce agreements. The cardinal best practice, the most important one is community engagement that fosters inclusion in redevelopment planning and decisions.

Smart growth can be a linchpin of the new economy: green design, green buildings and green jobs. Linking equity, green buildings, green design, green jobs and smart growth can promote health, measurable access to opportunities and prosperity. Green design and green buildings are the systems approach to the built environment incorporating principles of energy efficiency, water conservation, resource conservation, open space preservation, and healthy indoor environments. These represent cost savings and health benefits for financially strapped people.

Smart growth and going green must derive from public policy imperatives and investments that address quality of life in all communities. Low income and affordable housing in neighborhoods must be safe and energy-efficient, plus housing must be connected to public transit, education, healthy food systems, retail and employment opportunities. Green buildings will equal public health when coupled with affordable health care and health care access, which should help address health disparities such as obesity, diabetes, asthma and lead blood levels.

There is a need for infrastructure and increased resources in disadvantaged communities including public safety and access to public recreational amenities, parks and open space. Green buildings are tantamount to green jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities in energy conservation, alternative energy such as solar and wind, alternative energy R&D and technology, and environmental cleanup. Education, workforce development, training and improving small business access to bonding and capital are indispensable.

With the advent of the new economy, there are opportunities societally in this country to produce game-changing results. Smart growth can either help or hinder. Smart growth can smarten up by linking equity with bricks and mortar redevelopment objectives. This is a challenge highlighted by the fact that in many places where disadvantages converge most significantly – these are the very places where developers and lenders aren’t rushing in. There are lots of these sites like this around the nation that communities are clamoring about and there is a need to address them.