News On The New Partners Conference:

Over 1,200 people are registered for the 2006 New Partners for Smart Growth conference, to be held January 26-28 in Denver. This is our largest attendance ever. Business community participation is also far greater than we have seen in the past, indicating to us that Smart Growth is clearly moving into the mainstream.

Speakers for the closing session include the highly acclaimed Mayor of Denver, John Hickenlooper and Dr. Richard Jackson, former Public Health Officer for the State of California. Jackson will be coming directly from London, where he is attending a meeting hosted by the Prince of Wales. Both speakers will assess the progress of the Smart Growth movement and what we need to do next.

Knitting Our People And Neighborhoods Back Together: Driving through newer developments today, one commonly finds houses of varying prices carefully separated from one another, sometimes there is even a wall separating more affordable housing from larger homes.

A century ago, housing for people of different income levels were found in the same neighborhood. Granny flats were tucked in here and there, and larger homes were often bracketed by four-flat “great houses” similar in architectural style to their neighbors. Town houses and mansions could be found on the same street.

A recent article in Planning Magazine points out that there are benefits of knitting varied housing choices into a single neighborhood – doing so promotes social and economic sustainability by allowing residents to stay in the neighborhood even when housing needs change. A young family on a limited income can join the neighborhood community and seniors can afford to remain after they retire.

The need to address sprawl is also driving newfound interest in creating more housing diversity, particularly from developers and planners. Communities with growth limitations imposed by geography or urban boundaries are looking to the densification of existing neighborhoods as a way of accommodating the need for more housing units. Mixing well-designed, small-scale multifamily projects in existing neighborhoods allows growth without expanding onto agricultural land or untouched areas of the watershed.

A citizen-imposed urban limit line and a growing population have challenged the City of Ventura, California. Newly hired city manager Rick Cole, backed by his city council, is demanding a mixture of housing types and uses in new projects. Cole insists on five types of housing instead of two, with duplexes and triplexes spread across the project rather than being located farthest away from single-family houses. Ventura city policy makers believe that creating neighborhoods that serve a broader range of people with differing income levels will create better neighborhoods that will remain vibrant through time.

Surprisingly, communities in Texas are also requiring mixed income neighborhoods. The City of Fort Worth has designated 13 urban villages, and has zoned them for high intensity, mixed use and mixed housing types.

In central Austin, near the University of Texas, the City developed a neighborhood overlay zone which allows increased residential densities in an area of 231 acres. The surrounding neighborhoods supported the idea because it reduces the pressure to house students in their neighborhoods.

Two cities in Texas, McKinney and Lancaster, have adopted codes for brand new neighborhoods that include a mix of housing types. The codes identify seven housing types and specify that a minimum number of types must be included within each zoned area. A primarily residential area might include single-family homes, duplexes, and cottage clusters or flats facing busier streets. An urban center could call for high-rise apartments and townhouses.

At the New Partners for Smart Growth conference, Urban Planner Michael Freedman and Ellen Dunham Jones, Director of the Architecture Program at the Georgia Institute of Technology, will present projects that revitalize declining strip development. They envision higher-density, mixed use, urban villages adjacent to existing single-family neighborhoods on one side and arterial streets on the other.

Communities from California to Florida are taking a new look at policies allowing second units. In Austin, TX, owners of single-family
lots with at least 7,000 sq.ft. can build a garage apartment or granny flat, and the city is thinking of reducing the minimum to 5,750 sq.ft.

Good design is critical to the success of mixing several housing types in a single neighborhood. To give developers a clear sense of what they want, the City of Portland is creating a “plan book” of 12 infill prototypes that can be approved under current regulations and which meet community design goals. The prototypes include housing designs and parking arrangements. At the same time, the City is analyzing current codes to identify changes that would legalize additional attractive prototypes. The idea is to make good design, “the path of least resistance” for developers.

Impressed by Portland’s initiatives, the City of Sacramento has hired Portland’s former planner in charge of infill projects. Sacramento also wants to use permit streamlining as a way of encouraging attractive-looking, higher density infill projects.

Even though the availability of land for new development is growing scarce, many developers still avoid taking on higher density infill projects. In addition to barriers presented by planning and building codes, NIMBYism remains a very serious problem. Individual residents understandably care more about keeping their own neighborhood as it is than they care about curtailing urban sprawl and saving watersheds. Overcoming this problem will require informed local leaders who understand big picture needs, including both city council members and advocates from the business, health, and environmental communities.

**Designed For Healthy Living:** As participants in the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Active Living Leadership program, LGC staff have gotten a healthy dose of information regarding the environmental causes of obesity. Consequently, we have been focused on helping our members plan communities where residents can incorporate walking and biking into their daily lives.

More recently, both RWJF and Kaiser Permanente have asked that we also study how to plan communities so that healthy eating options are readily available. Because obesity is a result of an imbalance between calories taken in and calories expended; both sides of the equation are important to good health.

Under the leadership of former Mayor and former LGC Board Chair Connie Stewart, the City of Arcata has emerged as a national model of community design in support of healthy living.

Arcata as a community cares a great deal about preserving its small town feel and unique charm.

Fueled by the desire to promote local business and restrict corporate chains, the Council implemented a fast food ordinance that capped the number of fast food outlets in the City. But when high school students took part in a mock city council meeting, it became obvious to Stewart that this ordinance was also important to the health of the community’s youth. The ordinance now limits the location of fast food restaurants near the high school.

Arcata High School has an open campus policy for lunch and students need to have restaurants nearby with fast and affordable service. Arcata’s low-income families are particularly concerned about affordability. Those needs are now being filled. According to Stewart, the fast food ordinance has led to the opening of many locally owned affordable new restaurants prepared to serve students who need a quick lunch.

Arcata’s general plan has as a goal the incorporation of commercial uses in neighborhood centers that meet the day-to-day retail and service needs of nearby residents. Land use regulations reinforce this goal. These policies assure that people can walk to their destinations and that healthy foods are available within walking distance. A new Bike and Pedestrian Master Plan is making walking and biking safer and more convenient.

Another General Plan goal is to retain agriculture and natural resource lands within the City. Achieving this goal requires there be a market for locally-grown produce. In 1979 the region’s North Coast Grower’s Association was established and now has over 100 members sponsoring 12 markets throughout the County every week. Local farmers sell what they have grown at the market, giving residents access to fresh, local produce, honey, mushrooms and cheese.

A similar undertaking, the Community Supported Agricultural program, offers “shares” of a farm’s harvest at the beginning of the year. Subscribers come to the farm once a week to pick up the produce. This program also helps maintain farming as an economically viable occupation by helping growers sell produce at full retail value, secure a market for the food before it is grown, and avoid going into debt for early season expenses.

Finally, the city and Humboldt State University cosponsor a student-run farm growing over 60 kinds of fresh, seasonal organic vegetables, herbs, and flowers. At least four local farmers got their start at the Arcata Education Farm.

Creating a city where residents have easy access to healthy, fresh food and the ability to incorporate walking and biking into their daily lives creates a setting for a healthy lifestyle. According to Connie Stewart, “Our residents deserve nothing less.”

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