New Partners for Smart Growth Conference Update: The 2007 New Partners Conference reached an attendance record of over 1,500 people—an all time high! The public health sector was an enthusiastic and very visible participant with 13% of all participants coming from a health profession. While the conference evaluations have not yet been tabulated, there was excitement in the air and an overwhelming consensus that it was a great conference.

Participants are already excited about the 2008 New Partners event to be held February 7-9 in Washington, D.C. With the presidential election going into full swing and the new Congress, we expect possibilities for policy change and lots of electricity in the air!!

Strategies to Guide Urbanization: At this month’s New Partners for Smart Growth Conference, former Vancouver city commissioner Gordon Price described how cities throughout the country are looking to do what Vancouver has done—accommodate a rapidly growing population by encouraging new growth in existing areas, in a pattern that doesn’t sacrifice livability.

The City of Austin, Texas is one of the many communities now faced with this challenge. A regional visioning process, Envision Central Texas, suggested that if Austin is to remain a sustainable, eco-friendly community as it grows, it must increase central city density. Austin is growing so fast—adding about 1 million people in the next 20 to 30 years—that the only real growth choice they have is to sprawl or not to sprawl. And in choosing not to sprawl, existing residents are being asked to accept increased density.

In response, city leaders have adopted a new zoning category, vertical mixed use or VMU. This zoning category specifies housing (some of it affordable) on top of optional offices, with commercial space such as shops, restaurants or businesses located on the ground floor.

The City is encouraging, rather than requiring, these new projects with a number of developer incentives. To earn them, developers must meet specific requirements to make the project conform with Austin’s urban vision that includes high-quality building design, meeting-the-street, pedestrian-friendly amenities, green-building requirements, and affordable housing.

Developers who choose the VMU option will be able to build at higher densities and reduce by 60% the parking required by the existing code.

To define where the new zoning can be used, the city defined VMU overlay districts. These include frontage properties along all of Austin’s existing and future transportation corridors. Where adjacent neighborhoods are involved, residents have been encouraged to “opt in” to VMU development along their transit corridors as a trade-off for protecting their residential areas from densification. Developers cannot apply for a VMU overlay zone if the adjacent neighborhood has “opted out.” Neighborhoods have been given a 90-day period during which they can adjust the code to fit their special interests and/or “opt out.” Adjustments may involve eliminating a favorite historic building or locally owned coffee shop from eligibility for VMU zoning.

For the NIMBY crowd, city planners warn that saying “no” to VMU development is not necessarily going to stop redevelopment from occurring. The advantage in not opting out is that neighborhoods get more certainty in the quality of the projects.

Many communities are now faced with the need to move from development patterns that are suburban to a more urban configuration. Adopting a mandatory form-based code will assure future consistency in design. However, in communities that don’t want to throw out their existing zoning code, the VMU Overlay District offers an alternative. To access a summary of Austin’s new code, go to www.ancweb.org.

Form-Based Code as an Urbanization Strategy: Those panels that addressed form-based codes at the New Partners conference were faced with crowds flowing out the doors. According to developer Chris Leinberger, “Rather than reform existing zoning codes, it generally is best to throw them out and start from scratch, putting in place a form-based code that will make it easy to do the right thing.”

Global Warming Issue Catches Fire: One of the more impassioned sessions at the New Partners for Smart Growth Conference was the plenary session that addressed global warming. Tim Wagner, Director of the Nebraska Department of Insurance, described the devastating impact of climate change on his industry, “in the future, insurance may not be available at all.” Dr. Richard Jackson pointed to global warming as “the greatest threat of all to human health.”

Asked to address the connection of smart growth to global warming, Professor Reid Ewing estimated that smart growth would have a strong impact on greenhouse gas emissions.
In California, 40% of greenhouse gas emissions come from the transportation sector. The effectiveness of smart growth in reducing auto use varies a great deal depending upon the project design and where it is located, but emission reductions average around 24% and can be as high as 52%.

According to Ewing, variables include regional accessibility (proximity to the center of the region), density, diversity, and design (primarily pedestrian friendly links to destinations). When you double all four of these variables, you can expect a reduction in VMT of 30 to 40%, according to Ewing.

One City’s Steps Toward Reducing Global Warming: Some years ago, the city council in Salt Lake City resolved that they would reduce the greenhouse gas emissions of the city’s municipal operations by 21 percent below 2001 levels by 2012 – the equivalent of Kyoto. Mayor Rocky Anderson has announced that Salt Lake City has already exceeded that goal by 148 percent, 6 years ahead of schedule.

Taking advantage of methane generated at the city’s wastewater treatment plant and landfill has had the greatest impact in reducing greenhouse gas emissions in City operations. Rather than flaring the gas off, it is now used to generate electricity. This has accomplished a reduction of 17,600 tons of equivalent carbon dioxide a year (This figure reflects the fact that the city’s only other energy supply is from coal burning plants.).

Other measures included replacing all incandescent bulbs with compact fluorescent bulbs, then using some of the money saved on utility bills to become the state’s largest purchaser of wind power. This step alone reduced carbon dioxide emissions by over 1,100 tons. In addition, all traffic lights have been replaced by LED lights and the city’s vehicle fleet is being downsized to smaller, more fuel-efficient vehicles.

An executive order has required that all buildings owned or managed by the city to be constructed or renovated according to LEED silver guidelines, at a minimum. However, the City went further and now requires LEED certification for all buildings that use city funds. Next will be incentives for private developers to construct according to LEED standards, with the possibility of incorporating LEED requirements into city building codes.

To reach the business community, the city sent trained staff or volunteers to businesses to perform an audit and make recommendations for greenhouse gas reductions similar to those already made in the city’s municipal operations. When a business agrees to a certain number of the recommended changes, they become branded an “E2” Business. The benefits include costs savings on energy bills, free media public relations and the use of the E2 Brand, and reduced advertising fees in several city newspapers and other publications. Forty two local businesses are now certified E2.

Next, a certified E2 Citizen Program was developed to help people recognize their own impact on global warming and give them dozens of suggestions for reducing emissions. Anyone who commits to five or more of the reductions becomes an E2 citizen. Fifteen local businesses now give product and service discounts to E2 citizens.

In the category of Smart Growth, the City constructed a light rail system which has become so successful that communities that were adamantly opposed to light rail before the first line was built are now asking for it in their neighborhoods. Two sales-tax increases for supporting transit opportunities have been passed by an overwhelming margin.

A Response to McMansions: A measure has been passed in South Miami that places a moratorium on the construction of new two-story houses. The measure is aimed at preventing development of oversized homes or McMansions. City commissioners unanimously approved the measure which leaders hope will stave off new, large scale construction while they change the land use code.

A form-based code may provide the appropriate solution. In the coding process, residents can provide input through a design charrette and be assured that their concerns and visions for the future of the neighborhood will be implemented through the new zoning document.

Neighborhoods in both the City and County of Sacramento have joined many other jurisdictions that are preparing form-based codes to assure the future design integrity of their neighborhoods.