Seniors a Growing Constituency for Livable Communities: The AARP has been a strong supporter of Smart Growth/Livable Communities and a loyal participant and funder of the annual New Partners for Smart Growth Conference. Their support is based on the fact that seniors wish to maintain their independence well beyond the time when they are no longer able to drive a car.

The majority of seniors would prefer to stay in their own homes rather than move to a retirement community. To achieve auto independence, seniors need to live in neighborhoods with a safe pedestrian environment, easy access to grocery stores and other shops, a mix of housing types, and nearby health centers and recreational facilities.

There are any number of constituents for this type of community including public health officials, air quality and transportation professionals, environmentalists concerned about global warming, agricultural and other interests concerned about open space preservation — and the list goes on.

To help seniors better understand how neighborhood design and land use planning can impact their future independence, the AARP’s Public Policy Institute has recently updated a document titled, "Livable Communities: An Evaluation Guide."

The Guide explains what seniors need to know about transportation, walkability, safety and security, shopping, housing, and the like. It then provides surveys to use in evaluating specific neighborhoods and how they might be improved.

This guide could come in handy for educating seniors who serve on planning commissions, and citizen advisory committees addressing design review, general plan updates and redevelopment. To download a copy of the document and survey forms, go to www.aarp.org/research, click on More in Public Policy Institute, then under Resources and Data, click on Beyond 50.05 A Report to the Nation on Livable Communities, then click on Livable Communities: An Evaluation Guide.

New Rating System for Neighborhood Design: Following on the heels of LEED (a rating system for measuring the energy efficiency and environmental attributes of buildings) comes LEED-Neighborhood Development (ND), a new system that integrates smart growth, new urbanism, and green building technologies.

This three-layered lens evaluates projects by a number of criteria, including location, density, conservation of wetlands and agricultural lands, reduced automobile dependence, proximity to housing and jobs, walkability, energy efficiency, and a host of other measures. In total, LEED-ND has nine required benchmarks and 49 optional ones.

The draft LEED-ND rating system is being tested by applying it to 205 pilot development projects. The authors have indicated that the LEED-ND standard will likely be written as a code to guide cities and communities as they pursue green development.

California can be proud of having volunteered the most pilot projects — a total of 45. The majority of California projects are located in the San Francisco Bay Area with Los Angeles coming in second.

Once the full analyses of the pilot projects are complete, the results will be used to refine the final LEED-ND rating system. As with the current LEED system for rating individual buildings, the LEED-ND system will be administered by the U.S. Green Building Council.

Neighborhood Design as a Greenhouse Gas Reduction Strategy: Where people live has a major impact on their contribution to global warming. As part of the process of creating the LEED-ND rating system, the U.S. Green Building Council and the Congress for the New Urbanism studied this relationship in the Chicago region. They found that the average exurban Chicago household generates about 11.5 tons of carbon dioxide annually, primarily due to the use of the car. Households in suburban areas with commuter-rail service generated an average of 9 tons of carbon dioxide annually, and households in compact, mixed-use, rail connected suburbs generated 2.5 tons.

Seattle is one of the first major U.S. cities to have cut greenhouse-gas emissions enough to meet the targets of the international Kyoto treaty aimed at combating global warming. While overall greenhouse gas emissions fell by 9% between 1990 and 2005, the amount attributed to transportation rose 3% — largely due to increased auto emissions because of substantial growth in population and jobs.

Seattle is trying to lure people from their cars. Two tax measures approved by voters in 2006 make more money available to improve bus service, bike lanes and sidewalks. The city has just adopted a new plan to make it easier for Seattle residents to get where they need to go by bicycle. They have also passed development rules to encourage people to move downtown where they will drive less.

While Seattle is staying ahead of Portland in the competition to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, Portland has shown more progress on the transportation front. Auto emissions there are at almost the same level as 1990 and have even been dropping in recent years. Not coincidentally, a travel magazine just named Portland one of the three most bicycle-friendly cities in the world.
State of California Pushing Forward to Implement AB32: State agencies are now actively focused on determining their role in reducing greenhouse gas emissions in order to meet targets of AB32, CA’s Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006. LGC staff is providing input into many of the related hearings, and is an appointee to multiple advisory committees including those hosted by the Public Utilities Commission (PUC), the Land Use Subgroup of the Governor’s Climate Action Team, the California Department of Transportation’s Blueprint Planning Network, and the California Transportation Commission’s effort to rewrite funding guidelines to reflect AB32 concerns.

The PUC is tops on our radar screen this month. The PUC has approximately $2 billion to spend on energy efficiency programs over the next three years. PUC Commissioner Dian Grueneich, in charge of policies that affect these funds, asked the LGC, the League of CA Cities, ICLEI, the CA Association of Counties, and the Institute for Local Government to provide assistance in the development of a strategic plan to spend them. We are currently working with our local government partners to develop an agreement and joint statement to the PUC regarding what local governments need to reduce energy consumption in their communities.

The LGC is advocating for a policy that would provide funding and resources for sustainable, long-term local programs rather than the piecemeal system that is now in place. The San Diego, Ventura, and Humboldt County regional energy offices provide one model. These programs could provide cities and counties with assistance in both reducing energy consumption and developing greenhouse gas reduction plans.

Also part of the proceeding to produce a strategic plan for 2009-2020, the LGC has been invited to participate in committees examining “Local Government Roles” and “Workforce Education and Training.”

In a decision adopted in October 2007, the PUC approved a new energy efficiency strategy aimed at new construction. First, they adopted a zero net energy standard for new residential construction by 2020. An interim goal was set that 50% of all new homes achieve energy savings that are 35% below current total Title 24 energy efficient building codes. (Local governments could jump-start this goal through early adoption of these standards.) Second, the PUC adopted a zero net energy usage standard for all new commercial construction by 2030 which would be phased in gradually, starting again in 2011.

The PUC recognizes that it has no jurisdiction over affected stakeholders. Nonetheless, the decision orders the utilities and PUC staff to work with various stakeholders, including the Energy Commission, on energy building standards, local government planning and building officials, the BIA, developers, and labor on the development and implementation of a zero net energy usage strategy.

The focus now will likely shift to the Energy Commission, local governments that could pursue early adoption of these standards and possibly the office of the Attorney General who could establish these suggested standards as a mitigation requirement for greenhouse gas emissions created by new development.

We will keep our readers informed of the efforts of other state agencies and departments in future issues of Livable Places Update. In the meantime, a new feature on the LGC webpage titled “Implementing AB32” currently lists the relevant meetings, documents and rulings from the Administration as well as legislation affecting the implementation of AB32. You, our members, are invited to participate in any or all of these efforts.

Jolly Holidays and a Happy New Year from the Staff at the Local Government Commission!