Reflections On This Year’s New Partners for Smart Growth Conference: David Goldberg, an Atlanta-based journalist on the staff of Smart Growth America, wrote such an insightful summary of the 2008 New Partners for Smart Growth Conference that we asked to borrow it. He has titled his article: National Smart Growth Conference: Something’s in the Air. It is reprinted below:

"The New Partners for Smart Growth Conference — the annual gathering of local officials, community activists, policy wonks, advocates and regular people who simply care about how their communities grow — is always stimulating, always a great opportunity to exchange business cards with people who are equally passionate about the issues … Still, those attending for the seventh time this year could be forgiven for wondering what would be "new" this time around.

Yet the atmosphere was palpably different, more charged, more fraught with possibility than ever before. After it’s beginning seven years ago, the New Partners for Smart Growth Conference seemed as much a coming out party as anything. Maybe it was because the conference was in Washington DC this year, at a time when momentous climate legislation is under discussion and the looming change in administration lends an air of possibility. After all, it was the first time that people from all corners of the country had descended on Capitol Hill at once to hold more than 130 meetings with senators and representatives about the federal role in helping communities shape a future they can believe in. (The Hill Advocacy Day, organized by SGA, the American Planning Association and the Local Government Commission helped focus attention on including transit and land use provisions in the climate bill, potential Complete Streets legislation in the Senate, and support for the EPA Smart Growth program, along with other issues.)

Maybe it was the rousing applause and scores of volunteers responding to our new president and CEO (that's Geoff Anderson, formerly head of EPA's Smart Growth program and now with Smart Growth America) when he ticked off all the reasons why now is the time for the movement to burst out of the policy-think sessions and planning workshops and into the thick of the national debate over our country's future (A list of those reasons: concerns over oil dependence, climate change, a collapsed housing model, major demographic shifts, burgeoning cities, declining inner suburbs and the movement's growing track record of proven policies and urban design strategies.)

Maybe it was the packed auditorium for an 8:00 p.m. (!) session where U.S. Rep. Earl Blumenauer and Sen. Mary Landrieu talked about the potential breakthroughs in national legislation. Or the hundreds of local officials who came to the conference not to debate whether better planned, less auto-dependent development was right for their community, but to learn how to get it done. Or the more than 100 people who stayed glued to their chairs in a sweltering, windowless room for two full hours to delve into the gory details of the research on urban development and climate change, striving to translate it into real-world policy.

Wherever you turned, there was powerful evidence that this new movement has met its moment. The favored terms for what we're all striving for — smart growth, new urbanism, sustainable development, livable communities — seem to matter less and less as the ideas are absorbed more and more into the mainstream. Practical yet visionary, adaptable but focused, technical yet accessible - these values, goals, principles and practices for building our communities and ultimately your country are going to be in high demand in the coming years. It's going to be a big job. Are we ready?"

If you missed the stimulating 2008 conference, recordings of the sessions are available to order at www.NewPartners.org. Additionally, PowerPoint presentations from the majority of the sessions will soon be available and posted online at www.NewPartners.org.

Planning for next year's conference, to be held in Albuquerque New Mexico on January 22-24, 2009 will begin almost immediately. If you have a cutting edge idea for a session topic, please send an email to mkwarren@lgc.org to request a conference proposal submission form.

A Charged Atmosphere in CA: Something new was clearly in the air in DC, but California’s air is even more strongly affected. Yes, it is partially due to California’s high levels of air pollution. However the charged atmosphere is mostly the result of a growing number of city and county leaders, our Governor, and our Attorney General, awakening to the global warming challenge.

Rohnert Park's Mayor and LGC’s Vice Chair in charge of Government Relations Jake Mackenzie and LGC's Executive Director Judy Corbett are members of the Land Use Subcommittee of the Governor’s Climate Action Team. Committee members, as well as many local officials working on greenhouse gas reduction plans at the local level, know that in order to meet climate action targets, we must create places for people to live where driving a car is not the only
choice available for getting to daily destinations. Cars and small trucks represent the largest single source of greenhouse gas emissions in California. Statewide, the total is 41% but in some suburban communities, it is as high as 61%.

There is plenty of research at the national level demonstrating that land use patterns directly influence the amount people will drive. Today, however, we have California-specific information available based on analyses carried out by regional entities. For instance, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission has calculated that in 2006, people living in portions of San Francisco and Berkeley were producing only 1/3 the quantity of greenhouse gas emissions due to auto use as compared to those living in the suburban fringes of the Bay Area.

The question we are now grappling with is — How can local government leaders guide new neighborhood development so that it is carried out in a more environmentally-sensitive manner?

One option coming up on the horizon is a new rating system titled LEED for Neighborhood Development. LEED ND builds on LEED, a standard now required by many communities for new building construction. Requiring the “LEED ND” standard for large new development projects will assure that greenhouse gas emissions from VMT, as well as other sources, are minimized in newly built neighborhoods.

The US Green Building Council (USGBC), in collaboration with members of the LEED for Neighborhood Development Core Committee, representatives from local and state governments, and stakeholder associations which represent these entities, has created a guidance document to inform local and state governments looking to use LEED for Neighborhood Development as a policy tool. Interested parties may receive a copy of the document by contacting USGBC at: http://www.usgbc.org/DisplayPage.aspx?CMSPageID=148.

In a few regions of the State, Councils of Government are now using sophisticated computer models to calculate the greenhouse gas emissions from vehicle miles traveled (VMT) in proposed new development. More regions are expected to follow. The Sacramento Area Council of Governments has already used its computer capabilities to estimate the VMT of a 5,185-acre proposed new development, compared it to business-as-usual, then offered the local government suggestions for how to reduce projected emissions. As it turns out, the secret for reducing VMT and greenhouse gas emissions in this mixed use, master planned community is to make it more compact by increasing the number of homes from 14,000 to 20,000.

Contact your regional planning agency to determine whether they currently have this analysis capability or will have it in the future.

Best Bets For New Development: In these times of economic challenges, it is helpful to know what kinds of development experts are saying are the most promising for both short and long term success. Every year, Emerging Trends in Real Estate, published by PriceWaterhouseCoopers and the Urban Land Institute provides this information to developers and investors.

This year, Emerging Trends 2008 recommends just three development types: “Think Green”, “Focus on Mixed Use and Infill” and “Build Transit-Oriented Development.”

According to the report, “development of state-of-the-art sustainable buildings fills increasing demand. If it’s brown versus green, green has the competitive advantage.” Apparently local ordinances requiring green building will do both developers and the environment a favor.

Further, the report states, “fringe subdivisions without amenities loose appeal. Increasingly, people want 24-hour residential environments closer to where they work. Inspired by new urbanist concepts, these projects have pedestrian-friendly layouts, offering varied living options — condo, single family, apartments — and service retail, including grocery stores, pharmacies, cleaners, and restaurants.” The move back to city and town centers will continue, according to Emerging Trends, especially among empty nesters and career starters.

Due to mounting traffic congestion, the report advises that people are getting tired of car-dependent lifestyles. Higher gas prices, global warming issues, and pollution just add to frustration levels. They conclude that transit-oriented development almost can’t miss.

Surprisingly, the land use patterns that local officials must encourage today to address global warming are identical to those measures that will make developers more economically successful — a happy coincidence indeed!