Five Days in Albuquerque: A Report from the 2009 New Partners for Smart Growth Conference: It’s not unusual to hear people say “this was the best conference ever” following a New Partners for Smart Growth Conference, but the 2009 event held on January 22-24 in Albuquerque, NM, really was the best yet.

The conference kicked off at an exciting moment in history. The inauguration of President Barack Obama, held two days prior, gave attendees high hopes. They could see new possibilities for change and arrived ready to take on the serious economic and environmental crises of our day.

Speakers and participants alike shared facts and figures about the challenges ahead. Many brought specific program ideas, among them – strategies for addressing the mortgage crisis and creating green jobs. On the final day of the event, participants left Albuquerque feeling inspired and armed with a “yes we can” attitude.

Addressing The Mortgage Crisis – Creating Lemons from Lemonade: Often when Local Government Commission staff describe the Ahwahnee Principles, we hear in response, “fine -but what do we do about the neighborhoods we already have?” A few people are taking advantage of the mortgage crisis to answer that question. They recognize that vacant homes drag down surrounding home values, increase blight, drive up crime rates, and shrink tax bases. But can we use these lemons to make lemonade? Can we use the mortgage crisis to design and plan the neighborhoods of the future?

To plan accordingly, we must recognize that future neighborhoods and thus housing options will need to respond to changing demographics. Plenary speaker Chris Leinberger with the Brookings Institute noted that over the next 20 years, only 12% of households will have children and a large percentage of the population will be aging boomers. While many seniors prefer to remain in their own homes, those who move will be wanting to purchase a condo, town house, or loft located where they can walk or take transit to their destinations. Using graphs, he illustrated that we already have more large lot, single-family homes than the future market will require.

Fortunately, speakers arrived with some innovative and exciting ideas. Teresa Wright, Executive Director of the Local Initiative Support Corporation in Phoenix, AZ, advised communities to focus a portion of the federal bailout money on clusters of foreclosed homes located within walking distance of a neighborhood center, transit, services, jobs, and/or schools. These neighborhoods have the greatest potential to become better places to live.

Phoenix is offering buyers $15,000 if they purchase a foreclosed home and $25,000 if buyers commit to upgrading the home with energy efficiency measures. Buyers are offered even more if they purchase a home in targeted areas of the city that are near transit and within walking distance of essential services.

The City of Las Vegas, NV, purchased homes located in an area of concentrated foreclosures, scraped the ground clean, and put in a library. Wright suggested that cities might use the same strategy to increase densities and create mixed use projects. The first step should be to change the zoning in these areas to allow and even encourage such uses. In cul-de-sac areas, cities might also consider adopting policies that allow paths to be punched through dead end cul-de-sacs to enable future residents to walk or bike more directly to their destinations. This is an opportune time since there are no NIMBYs left to object to higher densities and other neighborhood improvements!

In Chandler, AZ – a city with many high tech jobs and high-priced housing – the community is purchasing foreclosed properties for a land trust. While they are undertaking this effort to prevent a price collapse, the community is also looking to preserve the land as a future site for affordable housing.

Where does the money come from to accomplish these projects in these troubled economic times? Speakers pointed to a new program – the Community Neighborhood Stabilization Program administered by HUD. This program will provide emergency assistance to state and local governments to acquire, redevelop, and
Dr. Richard Jackson noted in his presentation that, as a nation, we have faced similar economic challenges before and from this era of misfortune, many of our national landmarks were built, including the Golden Gate Bridge, the Brooklyn Bridge, and the Empire State Building. The same opportunity exists today. We can create both jobs and enduring communities through wise investment, especially since the cost of homes, land and materials are relatively inexpensive.

**Creating Green Jobs – Making the Green Revolution Happen:** Rick Cole, City Manager of the City of Ventura, CA, began his keynote address by providing a quick history of human economic activity. He started with the agricultural revolution, when humans gathered together in colonies to farm the land. The next economic shift came with the industrial revolution. Today, shortages of resources and a threatened planet demand a green revolution – a new economy based on products and services that leverage renewable energy resources, conserve natural resources, and reduce pollution and waste.

Another way to look at green jobs is to return to the framework provided by the recycling industry. This new paradigm applies not only to waste but can also apply to water and in some ways to energy.

We are already making progress. California added green jobs in recent years at a much more rapid pace than non-green jobs. From 2005 to 2007, the number of green jobs grew 10%, to about 105,000 in California, according to the newly released report, “2009 California Green Innovation Index.” During the same period, statewide job growth was about 1%.

The report also notes that a surprising 20% of the green jobs were in manufacturing, with the growth spread fairly evenly across diverse segments of clean technology, including advanced materials, transportation, air and environment, and green building.

A two-hour workshop and discussion on green jobs at the conference offered a number of examples of local governments that are beginning to transition to a green economy. Many of these efforts combine job training with policies that offer an advantage to green industries and products.

The City of Richmond, CA, passed a solar thermal rebate program and four other East Bay cities are working together to do the same. The creation of a solar installation training program will assure trained professionals will be there to meet the expected new demand. Richmond Councilmember Tom Butt noted that LEED building requirements, adopted by Richmond and many other communities throughout the country, are becoming a source of green jobs.

The City of Albuquerque is providing incentives for solar manufacturers using Tax Increment Financing funds. At the same time, it is offering job training to assure the industries have employees available. A new green academy is being established in high schools in the City of Fremont, CA. Graduates will have the option of moving on to a continuing program at the local junior college.

Hawaii has mandated solar thermal installations on all new homes by 2010. The Island of Maui is restoring watersheds and paying workers via a State-funded green jobs program.

Detroit, MI, and cities in Rhode Island are looking at urban gardens as an economic development tool. In California, both Oakland and San Francisco have initiated efforts to develop a food system where citizens consume products produced within a 100-mile radius of their cities. In Newark, NJ, the City is imagining a green future and charting a course to change to a green economy.

Currently, at least one in nine jobs is connected to the auto industry – a figure that likely does not include the people who build and maintain roads and parking lots. We need to quickly transform our economy to one where most, if not all, jobs are green.

**Looking to the Future:** In his plenary discussion, Rick Cole expressed his belief that land use reform is the most powerful tool we have to assure that we live within the limits of our resources. Thus, change must begin in our hometowns. We must create new zoning and building codes and other land use policies that consider energy, water, food, and mobility. Our task - “to create models for a sustainable planet.”

Surprisingly, it was a developer, Rob Dickson, owner of Paradigm and Company, who issued the most potent call for action - “We must organize politically to change public policy to affect the green revolution. We are finally seeing that we have to rescue the environment to save the planet.”

Stay tuned! The 2010 New Partners for Smart Growth Conference will be held in Seattle, WA, February 4-6. We expect the program to be loaded with even more new programs and new ideas for addressing the challenges ahead.