Economic Crisis May Offer Community Building Opportunities: Tight city budgets are necessitating deep cuts to important services in many cities and counties. In response, a few jurisdictions are allowing neighborhood organizations to pitch in and help maintain parks, police neighborhoods, and even take back streets for pedestrians. This strategy is likely to provide a couple of important side benefits — strengthening the sense of community and giving neighbors a stronger voice in the community at the same time as it cuts costs.

According to an article in the Modesto Bee, the days are gone when organizing neighbors meant meeting around the grill once a year for National Night Out. Quoting a local Modesto resident, “For the past umpteenth years, we’ve all been relying on the city to provide services as they deem fit. The economy is doing a great job of making us rely on ourselves and communicate our needs more effectively to the city.”

The La Loma neighborhood in Modesto now runs a private security patrol, holds community clean-ups, and mows and waters small parks the city can’t afford to maintain. The neighborhood also restored a park, turning it into a popular spot for soccer games and picnics. They funded the project with $30,000 raised from grants, city funds and donations from neighborhoods. According to one resident, “If you don’t like things, you need to communicate with your city as opposed to just complaining.”

Now, when the city parks and recreation department gets a request, they point to the La Loma project and offer to help others start their own neighborhood improvement group. The City recently assisted an emerging neighborhood association by mailing 2,000 questionnaires to residents of the area asking, “What do you like about your neighborhood, what do you dislike, and what do you want to change?”

In the July 2009 issue of Livable Places Update, we told the story of residents in San Francisco that joined with neighbors to successfully request a grant from the Bay Area’s Metropolitan Transportation Commission and, with the cooperation of the municipality, they calmed traffic on one of the city’s busiest streets. Neighborhood volunteers narrowed the road from 6 to 4 lanes by adding bike lanes, then planted two blocks of medians with drought tolerant plants.

In the City of Seattle, multiple neighborhood parks, tot lots, playfields, pocket parks, community gardens, streetscapes, traffic circles, greenbelts, salmon habitat and more have, for many years, been built through public/nonprofit/resident partnerships. The improvements are initiated by people in the community who step forward with ideas and get together with neighbors and coworkers to get projects done, with financial assistance from the City. The Seattle Department of Neighborhoods has facilitated this work.

Neighborhood associations can sometimes come and go, as members burn out. However, with increasing numbers of baby boomers becoming healthy and very active retirees, there is early indication that these volunteer groups will be playing a much larger role in improving and maintaining their neighborhoods in the future.

Vancouver Uses a New Approach to Providing Community Gardens and Building Community: Prior to hosting the Olympics, the City of Vancouver, B.C. challenged their residents to create 2,010 gardens by 2010 to serve as an Olympic legacy. Vancouver’s residents didn’t wait for the Olympics to come to town; they exceeded the 2010 goal well in advance of the event.

A former Vancouver elected official created this initiative. He determined that to be counted as part of the challenge, the city would require the gardens to be food-producing plots registered in a “Sharing Backyard and Grow a Row, Share a Row” program.

Gardeners without backyard space who still wanted to participate were allowed to plant gardens on publicly owned land, such as park space. There is however, one requirement — gardeners must be part of a non-profit to have access to the land. Non-profits help new gardeners find space and apply for grants to do further work.

The city helps community gardens by creating water lines, quickly approving sites and picking up green clippings and weeds.

Community groups and non-profit societies are welcome to approach the park board if they want to use space in a public park for a garden. There are but two conditions: Proposed sites shouldn’t interfere with coveted open space or sports fields, and neighbors must be consulted to assure adequate interest from nearby residents.

Public response for community gardens has been overwhelming and veggie-growers...
are being put on waiting lists managed by the various non-profit groups that maintain gardens across the city. According to a staff member with the city’s community services department, “The 2010 garden challenge is not just about growing food, but about growing community.”

An Earth Day Message from the CEO of the Urban Land Institute: According to Urban Land Institute CEO Patrick Phillips, “It is difficult to predict exactly what the city in 2050 will look like. However, what is clear is that piece-meal, haphazard and poorly connected development is a thing of the past.

“Going forward, this is what we can expect: building more densely to conserve energy, water and land, and to reduce the need to drive. Better coordination of land use planning and transportation planning, so that more development is oriented toward transit options. And, reusing and adapting obsolete space in a way that reflects the changing needs and desires of a much more mobile society — a society in which many are likely to rent longer and change jobs much more frequently.

“At 40 years, Earth Day 2010 marks a pivot point for land use and community building. Looking forward to Earth Day 2050, it’s important to consider how the impact of urban design and development meets residents’ expectations for livability, amenities, flexibility and choice. Ultimately, cities are about what’s best for people, not buildings, and not cars. The places that get this right will be the winners in the decades ahead.”

San Francisco Continues to Take Back The Streets: Streets take up approximately 25% of public space in San Francisco. City officials now believe that cars are getting more than their fair share of the city’s open space — more needs to be offered to the city’s human residents. In response, San Francisco has initiated a new Pavement to Parks project with a goal of creating a dozen new plazas and parklets (tiny parks) by the end of this year.

One of the first parklets was completed recently. It transforms two parking spaces (a total of 44 feet of the street) into a pleasant space to park a bike and sit around a table. The reclaimed space sits on a slightly elevated wood-like surface and is surrounded by planter boxes and shrubs.

Funding for the Pavement to Parks project is coming from a combination of private donations and a large pot of economic development money assembled by the Mayor’s Office of Workforce and Economic Development (MOEWD). Other funds are coming from regional and federal agencies. Each plaza costs approximately $30,000 to construct and each parklet costs less than $15,000.

Look for Rain Barrels in Washington, DC: The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has announced plans to require “green roofs,” rain barrels and other measures that trap runoff at new and redeveloped buildings in the District, making the city a test case for an ambitious effort to stop pollution from being washed into rivers by the rain. The plan has the added benefit of conserving water — captured water can be used for landscape irrigation.

The EPA’s plan, contained in a proposed permit for the District’s storm-sewer system, would require developers to trap the first 1.2 inches of rain that falls during a storm (it would require federal buildings to trap the first 1.7 inches).

Water usually hits roofs and parking lots and runs into sewers, carrying trash and chemical pollutants. Under the permit, that water would be filtered naturally, through plants and dirt, or be caught in a receptacle for watering plants.

If developers cannot make the changes, the EPA proposed, they would be required to pay for projects elsewhere.

The EPA will seek public comment on the plan, which would last five years. If approved, it would mean a major shift in thinking for a city covered in glass, concrete and asphalt and will hopefully help District residents and visitors view water as an asset rather than a waste product.

The measure is part of a larger effort, begun with a presidential order last year, to improve the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries. Rainwater is a major source of pollution for the Chesapeake, carrying into the Bay more than 10 percent of the two pollutants that cause “dead zones” downstream.

In the past few months, Virginia and Maryland have proposed similar measures to trap and filter rainwater. But house builders and other developers said they would add vast new costs to their projects. Virginia shelved its plan, and Maryland made some alterations that developers demanded.

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