Smart Growth As a Key Strategy for Rural and Small Town Communities: I’m from a rural community, how does Smart Growth apply to me?” This is a question Local Government Commission staff hear quite frequently from attendees at our annual New Partners for Smart Growth conference.

Many of our participants from rural communities are facing serious challenges, including rapid growth at metropolitan edges, declining rural populations, and loss of working lands. Fortunately, the International City County Management Association (ICMA) has responded to these ongoing challenges with a new document titled: Putting Smart Growth to Work in Rural Communities.

The ICMA document describes a rural, smart growth community as a place where people would love to live. There is a vibrant downtown with historical buildings that have been preserved, a walkable main street, and compact residential neighborhoods housing a variety of income groups. It is a place with a small-town feel and sense of community that develops when you know your neighbors, a place where residents gather in town for civic events or to shop.

The safe, tranquil town is next to nature, surrounded by pristine open space, forests or working farms. The local economy — whether built on resource extraction, tourism or new economic opportunities — celebrates and protects the surrounding landscape.

According to national columnist Neal Peirce, “The sad truth is as the stores and services get spread out across the landscape, the costs for roads and utilities escalate, town treasuries get pinched, and resources for long term planning run thin.”

Indeed, some rural communities, in response to tight budgets and dwindling state and federal revenue, have given up even trying to maintain the roads that service sprawl development. In Michigan, at least 38 of the 83 counties have converted some of their asphalt road surfaces to gravel. Counties in Alabama and Pennsylvania have begun downgrading asphalt roads to cheaper chip-and-seal road (also know as “poor man’s pavement”), and a few counties in Ohio are simply letting roads erode to gravel.

The ICMA report provides a roadmap to guide growth in rural areas while protecting natural and working lands and preserving the rural character of existing town centers. Their strategies are centered around three goals: 1) support the rural landscape by creating an economic climate that enhances the viability of working lands and conserves natural lands; 2) help existing places to thrive by taking care of assets and investments such as downtowns, main streets, existing infrastructure, and places that the community values; and 3) create great new places by building vibrant, enduring neighborhoods and communities that people don’t want to leave.

Changing Demographics — A New Opportunity For Small Towns? Baby Boomers are moving into their sixties. This is, by and large, a population with money. According to AARP, a third of the nation’s population is currently over fifty and they control half of the country’s discretionary spending. Near to retirement, they’ve been conservative with their investments and haven’t lost much in the stock market. They own their own homes, avoiding the home foreclosures that some of the younger members of our population are experiencing, and they have the resources to live where they want. Life in a charming small town where residents can stay healthier by incorporating walking into one’s daily life could be very appealing to many retirees. The concept of getting around without a car is a very practical concept for those who may not be able to drive in the future. Meeting one’s social needs by gathering with friends in a main street coffee shop or restaurant will also have great appeal.

As communities struggle to involve hard working residents in local activities, small towns that attract older people will have a population with time on their hands, more able to get involved in community services. And the
values that are traditionally associated with small towns — looking out for your neighbors, pitching in at local events, supporting civic causes — will find new footing.

To attract this population, it will be important to make certain that sidewalks and paths are safe and abundant, streets are easy to cross, and residential and commercial structures accommodate “visitability” (access for the disabled). It is also essential that a community clinic for health care and emergency services is available.

It is easy to envision a smart growth strategy by which small towns and rural communities can become vibrant once again, build on the financial resources of the older population, and become such beautiful places that homegrown kids will be loathe to leave and a younger, more mobile generation will be drawn to live. But how do we get there from here?

**For Implementation Ideas, Come To Charlotte:** The 2011 New Partners for Smart Growth Conference, to be held in Charlotte, NC will feature much that will be of interest to participants from small towns and rural communities. A plenary titled, “A Smart Growth Approach to Rural Development” featuring invited Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, will go into detail about how rural communities can enhance economic competitiveness, solve transportation challenges, improve public health, protect the environment, and revitalize disadvantaged communities.

In addition, the conference will offer a special track of sessions that delve into some of these key growth and development issues facing small towns and very rural places and will feature ways that individual communities are overcoming them.

We will have the opportunity to hear about building and maintaining strong rural, local economies; regional planning in rural areas; code reform for small towns; addressing rural transportation issues; maintaining rural character while addressing growth pressures; addressing changing demographics; preserving farmland and open space; goods movement; equity and environmental justice; and green infrastructure. The program will include experts on these issues as well as diverse case studies from rural places from across the country.

Don’t miss it! Come to the New Partners for Smart Growth Conference to be held in Charlotte, NC on February 3-5, 2011. For more information, visit www.NewPartners.org.

**Finding Community in the City:** Small towns with strong town centers are a great place to find community, but with the proper design, cities can accomplish the same! Henry David Thoreau wrote, “City life is millions of people being lonesome together.” Viewed from afar, city life can certainly appear impersonal and isolated. However, a successful city can be a collection of local neighborhoods, with their own identity, their own traditions, and their own sense of community. And the values that are traditionally associated with small towns — looking out for your neighbors, pitching in at local events, supporting civic causes — are finding new footing in America’s cities, thanks in part to President Obama’s call for “a new era of service.”

To accomplish community in the city, it’s important to provide places and reasons for people to come together. Neighborhood restaurants or coffee shops could fill this need — or even the corner pub, “where everyone knows your name.”

Parks with places for retired people to sit and play checkers or cards, tot lots for the very young and basketball or skateboard opportunities for older siblings, bring neighbors together, creating a special community bond. Community gardens provide healthy eating and active living, as well as creating safe places for building a sense of community.

Some larger cities have created gathering places in the street. Oakland closed a street for a weekend party. In New York, Broadway in and around Times Square has been closed permanently. San Francisco is carving out portions of the Street for outdoor dining, a practice that originated some years ago in downtown Mountain View, CA.

Creating opportunities for volunteerism can also build community by bringing people together. And in these tough budget times, this strategy can help provide extra sets of hands to over-worked city staff.

On September 10, 2009, the country’s leading mayors launched “Cities of Service,” a bi-partisan coalition of large and small city mayors from across the country who will create innovative plans to leverage volunteers and connect them with service opportunities that address local challenges.

New York launched the program, initially, and a year later the city has trained over 50,000 New Yorkers in CPR, administered 160,000 H1N1 vaccinations, educated 4,400 students on emergency preparedness, and painted over 225,000 square feet of roof tops with reflective paint to help buildings reduce their carbon footprint.

But this effort is for small cities too. Among the towns in California that have signed up are Roseville, Chula Vista, Davis, Santa Rosa, and Santa Cruz.

The Rockefeller Foundation and Bloomberg philanthropies are providing grants to some of these cities to hire a full-time chief service officer. For more information on this impressive program, contact www.citiesofservice.org.

**Livable Places Update** is published monthly and is a project of the Local Government Commission’s Center for Livable Communities. For subscription information call us at ☎ (916) 448-1198. If you have news from your area to include in future issues, please send it to: LPU, 1303 J Street, Suite 250, Sacramento, CA 95814.