

LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMISSION

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Albuquerque hosts smart growth leaders from across the country

National conference examines connections between public health, economic recovery and livable communities

January 22-24, Albuquerque Convention Center

Hundreds of planners, developers, community leaders and other smart-growth practitioners will gather in Albuquerque this week for a national forum on innovative local approaches to economic and environmental sustainability.

The 8th annual New Partners for Smart Growth conference, running January 22-24 at the Albuquerque Convention Center, explores how effective partnerships can provide the political will and technical expertise needed to overcome inertia and change business as usual – and take real steps toward economic recovery.

“The vibrant city of Albuquerque is the perfect setting for this year’s event. Albuquerque can be viewed as a crossroads city, trying to balance future challenges with the desire to preserve centuries of cultural heritage,” said Judy Corbett, executive director of the Local Government Commission, which is organizing the conference. “The city is a perfect laboratory for the potential of smart growth to enhance the cultural, environmental and economic fabric of the city and state. “

Sitting at the intersection of Interstates 25 and 40, the region stands on the verge of rapid growth. The new “green-tech” and film industries emerging in the local economy complement the legacy of high-tech capital flowing from Sandia National Laboratory and Intel in nearby Rio Rancho.

“Our country is facing enormous challenges – energy, climate change, the economy, housing, public health, water shortages. Never before has there been such an urgent need for community leadership and innovation,” said Corbett. “Participants at the Albuquerque conference will have a chance to learn from and be inspired by innovative local responses to these pressing issues.”

The event spans three days, covering cutting-edge smart growth issues, the latest research, implementation tools and strategies, successful case studies, new projects and new policies. The conference will feature 300 speakers, more than 100 sessions and 11 tours of local model projects.

New Mexico Focus

Featured among the conference’s speakers are more than three dozen local elected officials (including state Representative Elias Barela, Santa Fe Mayor David Coss, Albuquerque Mayor Martin J. Chávez and Albuquerque Councilor Rey Garduno), educators, business leaders, health experts and transportation and land use planners from New Mexico.

Beyond the convention center, the conference offers a mix of light rail, bus, biking and walking tours that will showcase community revitalization projects, transit-oriented developments, cutting-edge urban infill and green buildings – ranging from a “Taste of Taos” walking tour of the historic district and its food, art and architecture to a bike tour of infill projects to sustainable housing and transit-oriented development in downtown Albuquerque.

“Sustainable energy is at the forefront of my administrative priorities, and I encourage policymakers and citizens to help lead our community in becoming a national model in energy conservation, development and adoption of leading-edge technologies for conservation, transportation, clean energy production and sustainable economic development,” Mayor Chávez said.

Land use planning is an important tool for achieving those goals. While New Mexico’s population has increased by 48%, the state’s vehicle miles traveled increased more than 112% between 1980 and 2005, according to the “Growing Cooler” report of the Urban Land Institute.

Based on current development and transportation spending trends, the amount of driving will increase 55% more than will population increase in and around Albuquerque, according to the Mid Region Council of Governments. A 2006 report by the Climate Change Advisory Group notes the importance of land use to combat climate change, with land use-related actions in New Mexico comprising 17.5% of potential emissions reductions to meet the 20% reduction in carbon emissions by 2020.

Smart growth can also affect the state – and you – financially. A May 2008 report from the National Resources Defense Council on “The Cost of Climate Change” found that the national impacts on water resources due to climate change total approximately \$1 trillion, with much of that expense coming from the Southwest and Southeast regions of the country. The report also identifies the Southwest and Southeast areas as the regions most at risk to accrue financial impacts in the energy sector due to climate change.

Smart Growth and Economic Recovery

Well over a decade ago, there was a good deal of attention given to the cost of sprawl. In these painful economic times, it may be time to revisit this topic.

Rutgers University Professor Robert Burchell was one of the first to study the cost of sprawl and the economic benefits of compact, smart growth land use patterns. In the mid-nineties, he estimated the savings of moving to more compact development. He found a 20 to 40% savings in land overall, a 15% reduction in the cost of local and state roads, and an 8 to 15% reduction on water and sewer costs. Overall, the infrastructure savings of more compact development were calculated to be 15%. If we were to build only according to smart growth principles, U.S. cities would save about \$250 billion in infrastructure costs between 2000 and 2025, Burchell estimated.

A “Growing Cooler” study released by the Center for Clean Air Policy last year, warns that if sprawling development continues to fuel growth in driving, the projected 59% increase in the total miles driven between 2005 and 2030 will overwhelm expected gains from vehicle efficiency and low-carbon fuel standards. Even with those improvements, vehicle CO₂ emissions would be 40% above 1990 levels in 2030 – entirely off path from reductions of 60-80% below 1990 levels by 2050 required for climate protection.

The savings over that period equate to a 28% increase in federal vehicle efficiency standards by 2020 (to 32 mpg), comparable to proposals currently being debated in Congress. Compact development would cut national fuel expenditures by \$24 billion in 2030 or \$250 billion on a cumulative basis.

We can also look to “greening” the economy as an attractive strategy for economy recovery. One conference session at the Albuquerque conference, titled “Green Jobs: Defining Opportunities in Economic Development for a Sustainable Future,” will bring together a panel of experts on green jobs to explore best practices for defining green jobs, identifying green jobs locally, customizing job training to reflect a greener economy, and local policies such as energy conservation retrofit ordinances that create employment opportunities for graduates of green job training programs.

Changing our communities’ housing patterns and transportation habits can also contribute to making our economy more sustainable. Based on 2004 statistics from the U.S. Bureau of Labor, the average family spent 32% of their income on housing and 25% on transportation. Those who live in walkable

communities where transit is easily accessible spent 32% for housing but only 9% for transportation, leaving much more of their income left over for food, health care and other items. More compact housing can also lower energy and water bills.

Focus on Schools and Public Health

The conference offers a three-day track on schools and livable communities, cosponsored by Albuquerque Public Schools, which focuses on green schools, community-school joint use partnerships, transportation opportunities for schools, school facilities and changing demographics. There is also a tour of Coronado Elementary School, showcasing how the historic site was brought up to modern standards without compromising its original architecture and authenticity. Kizito Wijenje, the capital master plan director for Albuquerque Public Schools, is one of the speakers.

A dozen conference sessions, including a day-long workshop for health professionals, are also devoted to health-related topics. They cover everything from how to design and build environments that support physical activity and access to healthy food, to case studies of health professions and planners working together.

The conference has a goal of being a “carbon neutral” event. Sustainability considerations have been incorporated into the conference by focusing on opportunities for resource conservation, reducing the amount of printed materials, encouraging the use of public transit, putting largely locally grown and organic food on the menu, and facilitating carbon offsets for conference impacts. Carbon offsets will be purchased from the Climate Trust and Green Energy New Mexico.

Conference sponsors include the Local Government Commission and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Cosponsors from New Mexico also include Albuquerque Public Schools, the New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department, the New Mexico Department of Transportation, the New Mexico chapters of the American Planning Association and the American Institute of Architects, the New Mexico Association of Counties, the New Mexico Main Street Program, the New Mexico Municipal League, the New Mexico League of Women Voters, 1000 Friends of New Mexico, St. Joseph Community Health, the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority, Build Green New Mexico, the Greater Albuquerque Housing Partnership, the Homebuilders Association of Central New Mexico, the Quality Growth Alliance of Las Cruces, and the University of New Mexico’s Alliance for Transportation Research Institute and Community and Regional Planning Department.

For more details about the agenda, speakers, sponsors and tours: www.newpartners.org

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