

LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMISSION

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Smart Growth and Water: Strategies for Responding to Drought, Climate Change Impacts *National conference examines connections between water resources and land use planning.*

Albuquerque Convention Center, January 22-24

After two years of drought conditions and with disappointing first surveys of snow levels this winter, many communities face water rationing this summer. While not all parts of the country are facing drought conditions, in the South and West, water resources are threatened as never before. Rapid population growth, climate change and flooding, aging infrastructure, inefficient water use, and water quality impairment pose tremendous challenges for the Southwest and the rest of the nation. Smart growth strategies offer some promising solutions.

Many of those innovative approaches will be on the table at the 8th annual New Partners for Smart Growth conference, being held January 22-24 at the Convention Center in Albuquerque, NM.

“Water and land use are intricately connected. Communities need water to grow, but the way we grow can have serious impacts on the water we need,” said Judy Corbett, Executive Director of the Local Government Commission, which is organizing the conference. “With numerous threats to the nation’s water supplies and growing uncertainty about the impacts of climate change on local flooding, the connections between local land use decisions and water has come to the forefront.”

For example, polluted urban runoff tops the list of threats to our nation’s water supplies. While conventional growth patterns create more pavement and lead to greater amounts of runoff and water quality degradation, compact, smart growth serves to reduce runoff. Smart growth also protects watersheds, lands that are important to replenishing our water supplies.

The physical, chemical and biological properties of natural land cover are essential to the hydrological processes underlying the health and function of watersheds. The loss of natural land cover contributes to watershed degradation. Open space policies have a crucial impact.

Green Infrastructure

Green infrastructure is one approach to watershed management that is cost-effective, sustainable and environmentally friendly. At the largest scale, the preservation and restoration of natural landscape features (such as forests, floodplains and wetlands) are critical components of green stormwater infrastructure. On a smaller scale, green infrastructure practices include rain gardens, porous pavements, green roofs, infiltration planters, trees and tree boxes, and rainwater harvesting for non-potable uses such as toilet flushing and landscape irrigation.

A conference session titled, “Smart Streets for Smart Growth: Implementing Green Infrastructure” will use case studies to illustrate what experts are doing to incorporate green infrastructure into streetscape designs while achieving Smart Growth goals.

Urban Growth and Water

The disconnects between growth, water and land use have fueled profligate use of water and land in the West and elsewhere, with grave implications including dwindling groundwater resources and the cumulative impacts of poor management on the landscapes, ecosystems and rural communities of the West.

The conference features a session titled “Growth, Land and Water: Making the Connection in the Arid West,” that focuses on the question of how population growth can be reasonably connected to available and expected future water supplies. Communities that are moving toward policy reforms that slow sprawl and promote smart growth will be featured.

Communities Near Water

Waterfront and coastal communities have historically been, and will remain, desirable places to live. The unique amenities that draw people to the water — oceans, lakes or riverfronts — also require special consideration when addressing growth and development. The conference will explore waterfront principles and associated policies that provide local communities with tools, techniques and case studies for implementing waterfront and coastal smart growth at a workshop titled, “Smart Growth at the Water’s Edge.”

Other conference sessions will clarify linkages between land use and water, and explain the impacts of conventional growth patterns and development practices on water demand, water quality, infrastructure, flooding and runoff, and the health of watersheds and their resources.

The Future of Agriculture

Water is the lifeblood of the farm, and drinking water is a resource farmers can cost-effectively help protect for communities. Farmers with strong conservation programs on their farms are playing an increasingly large role as part of the environmental services infrastructure. They are coordinating with local municipal waste and water systems and establishing new models for rural economies. These measures will be shared at a session titled, “From Farm to Sea: Agriculture Working for Cleaner Water.”

Stormwater Regulation

Given the many quality-of-life benefits of compact development, density should rank as the first and best possible stormwater practice for growing communities, but it is barely emerging as a secondary alternative among regulatory agencies, in part because permitting density as a management practice is less straightforward than traditional regulatory techniques.

Conference panelists will review the evolution of the stormwater policy landscape, and then present the scientific evidence for the water quality benefits of high versus suburban densities.

About the conference: The New Partners for Smart Growth conference will be held January 22-24 at the Albuquerque Convention Center. The event, hosted by the Local Government Commission, 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.

Conference hosts include the Local Government Commission and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Among multiple cosponsors are Kaiser Permanente, the National Association of REALTORS®, and the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority. For more details about the agenda, speakers, sponsors and tours go to: www.newpartners.org

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