

LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMISSION

A national nonprofit, membership organization
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Note for reporters: During the event, please check in at the conference registration desk in the Grand Ballroom foyer of the Westin Charlotte Hotel (601 S. College St.) to obtain a media credential.

Making Smart Growth Work for Everyone

National conference explores the role of smart growth, equitable development and environmental justice in economic growth and community revitalization

Two-thirds of development expected to be on the ground in 2050 is not yet built, which means the potential for change is profound. Smart growth, equitable development and environmental justice all strive for development that creates healthy, vibrant places and that gives people greater opportunity and choice. Given this common goal, how can smart growth, equitable development and environmental justice supporters work together to ensure that development decisions meet the needs of disadvantaged communities?

How can smart-growth investments foster equitable development, environmental justice and economic vitality, and ensure that lower-income communities, communities of color and indigenous communities participate in and benefit from the decisions that shape their neighborhoods and surrounding regions?

In Charlotte this week (Feb. 3-5), the 10th annual New Partners for Smart Growth Conference – the largest and most comprehensive smart growth/sustainable communities conference held in the U.S. each year – will explore these critical issues, and showcase strategies and opportunities for greater collaboration among smart growth, equitable development and environmental justice advocates. [For agenda: www.NewPartners.org]

"The vision of environmental justice is the development of a holistic, grassroots, community-based, and unifying paradigm for achieving healthy and sustainable communities – both urban and rural. There are many stellar accomplishments, entrepreneurial successes, and significant victories – both big and small. Communities have been at the forefront of implementing solutions for advancing sustainability as well as encouraging equitable development at the local level. Environmental justice advocates are achieving extraordinary outcomes everyday and we will continue to support them," said Lisa Garcia, Senior Policy Advisor to the Administrator for Environmental Justice at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

In addition to the conference's Equitable Development track of sessions, a daylong, pre-conference workshop on "Achieving Equitable Development: Strategies to Empower Community Organizations" (Wednesday, Feb. 2) will feature federal officials and community leaders who will focus on building the capacity of community-based organizations to engage on growth and development issues in their neighborhoods, communities and regions to help revitalize America's disadvantaged areas, grow the economy, and create healthy and sustainable communities.

Key workshop sessions include equitable development policy and trends, issues facing small towns and rural areas, financing equitable development, and how community groups can work with local, state and federal government agencies.

Achieving equitable development results requires the integration of smart growth principles with the unique character, context and voice of local communities," said Elizabeth Yeampierre, Executive Director of UPROSE, chair of the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council. "Encouraging reinvestment in existing communities and neighborhoods is a central principle of smart growth. However, new investment and redevelopment must not result in the displacement of low-income communities and communities of color. Redevelopment and growth should be consistent with local priorities and needs."

Communities of color have had to face disproportionate environmental risks as a byproduct of unequal and unsustainable development patterns. Espousing green empowerment zones, weatherization and green development to brighten prospects for declining communities, many government agencies and major advocacy organizations are now trying to leverage expanding green development initiatives to support healthy communities to meet today's challenges of concentrated unemployment and underutilized infrastructure. Climate-neutral reinvestment strategies, including building rehabilitation, public transit and walkable communities, have synergies with equitable development.

With more than half of the nation's poor families now living in the suburbs, the smart growth-equitable development challenge isn't just an urban problem. Nor is the viability of smart growth limited to major metropolitan regions.

Rural communities are sometimes underrepresented in the dialogue about smart growth. The Friday morning plenary on "Smart Growth and Rural America" will examine how smart growth approaches can help rural communities enhance economic development, improve public health, solve transportation challenges, and revitalize disadvantaged communities. U.S. Agriculture Deputy Undersecretary Doug O'Brien will discuss federal investments that USDA is making to enhance sustainability and economic development opportunities in rural communities, and Assistant Administrator Mathy Stanislaus will describe the resources that the EPA has to help rural communities, including federal grants to help small towns and rural communities revitalize areas around brownfields.

Similarly, the conference will also explore effective strategies for "Advancing Equity in Disadvantaged Unincorporated Communities." Low-income residents of unincorporated communities face health and safety risks that are less widely understood in large part because the very nature of being "unincorporated" means there is less information about the area and fewer opportunities for residents to raise issues in public meetings or planning reports.

"Many of these communities are victims of lack of governance, poor or no planning – and even discriminatory practices – that often result in a severe lack of basic community infrastructure such as safe sidewalks and quality of life services like safe drinking water," said Deohn Ferris, President of Sustainable Community Development Group, Inc.

The Saturday morning plenary on "Moving our Country to a Green(er) Economy" provides a broad discussion about integrating equitable development considerations into the future directions of economic growth.

"We now know that smart growth strategies are critical to job growth and economically healthy regions across the country – from our rural towns to our biggest metropolitan cities," said Judy Corbett, one of the plenary speakers and the executive director of the Local Government Commission, a nonprofit, membership organization based in California, which is organizing the national conference.

"From the city to the state to the national level, we're facing large economic and fiscal challenges. The deferred costs of our outdated approach to development are coming due," said Smart Growth America's President/CEO Geoff Anderson, one of the plenary speakers. "We can start moving the needle in the right direction – creating jobs, saving taxpayer money, and making better use of the money we do have – by meeting pent up consumer demand for walkable neighborhoods, and making smarter use of our scarce public infrastructure dollars."

During the plenary, Durham Mayor Bill Bell will also describe how his city has partnered with an affordable housing developer to help residents reduce their household energy expenditures while also providing green jobs for those in need of work in his community.

Many of the sessions throughout the conference will be dedicated to the underlying themes and topics of – and practical tools and strategies for – better connecting smart growth, equity and environmental justice issues.

"This conference is a powerful opportunity to ensure that decisions about the future of our communities are shaped by the people who live in them. The expertise and commitment of local leaders – especially those from marginalized communities – will be critical to our success in designing long-term, equitable solutions that bring opportunity to everyone," said Don Chen, Metropolitan Opportunity Program Officer for the Ford Foundation, and the equitable development workshop's keynote speaker.

A group of foundations are providing support for a diversity scholarship fund to allow more participants from lower-income and underrepresented communities to attend the conference.

About the conference: The New Partners for Smart Growth conference, hosted at the Westin Charlotte Hotel by the Local Government Commission, a national nonprofit, membership organization based in California, spans three days and covers cutting-edge smart growth issues, the latest research, implementation tools and strategies, successful case studies and new policies. The conference will feature 400 speakers, 100 sessions and 11 tours of local model projects. For more information about the conference sponsors, agenda, speakers and tours: www.newpartners.org

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