

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.

Nation's smart growth leaders get good look at Charlotte region's successes and future challenges

Like many major metropolitan areas around the country, many of the challenges facing the Charlotte region are ultimately connected to a rapidly growing population. More than 2.2 million people now call the 14-county, two-state region home, and another million people are expected to join them by 2030, according to the 2007 Charlotte Regional Indicators Project.

That population growth, coupled with the current economic hardships of high unemployment, stalled business development, limited tax revenues and an epidemic of home foreclosures in the Charlotte region, presents serious, long-term challenges for the area's transportation network, affordable housing, sustainable economic vitality and job creation, schools, public health, safety and services, social equity, and air and water quality.

Given this lull in economic development, many of the region's leaders are looking for the silver lining and see this as a good time to strengthen regional collaborations, revamp zoning and building codes, add measures to promote affordable housing, encourage mixed-use, green buildings, identify target areas for infill and higher density, and choose smart, proactive alternatives to sprawl – all so their communities can thrive when the economy recovers.

Next week, close to 1,400 local officials, health professionals and community leaders from across the country will get a close look at what the region is doing to tackle these issues when many of the nation's experts and advocates who are creating more livable, sustainable communities elsewhere converge on Charlotte for the 10th annual New Partners for Smart Growth conference (February 3-5, Westin Charlotte Hotel). [For agenda: www.NewPartners.org]

"Charlotte is the perfect setting for this year's event, with its unique mix of financial epicenter, vibrant cosmopolitan city and small-town Southern charm – it's everything that 'livable communities' embody," said Judy Corbett, the executive director of the Local Government Commission, a nonprofit, membership organization based in California, which is organizing the national conference.

Befitting Charlotte's reputation as one of the nation's leading financial capitals, the conference will kick off Thursday evening (Feb. 3, 7:15 p.m.) with a plenary on "Financing Smart Growth: From Public to Private Investments in Sustainable Communities," exploring our country's current fiscal and real estate development conditions, and how the market for smart growth may fare as financial realities change in the coming years.

Charlotte Mayor Anthony Foxx will welcome the national audience on Thursday evening, and many other local speakers are confirmed to participate throughout the three-day event. Local speakers include Durham Mayor Bill Bell and Princeville Mayor Priscilla Oates; planning, transportation, housing, utilities and development officials from Mecklenburg and Gaston counties and the cities of Charlotte, Greensboro, Raleigh, Davidson, Asheville, Gastonia and Cary; school administrators such as Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools' executive director for planning; and executives from several Charlotte-based developers, architects and financial corporations will also join the conference. Representatives from several North Carolina state agencies, preservation organizations and advocacy groups as well as faculty from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and UNC-Charlotte will also participate in the event.

Mitch Silver, President of the American Planning Association and Planning Director for the City of Raleigh, will deliver the conference's closing keynote address on "Transforming Our Cities in a Globally Competitive World." For our cities and towns to remain competitive in a global economy, they must be attractive and unique places. Silver will discuss his role in helping to shape Raleigh into a globally competitive city by enhancing public transit, re-sculpting the city's suburban neighborhoods, and building on Raleigh's best assets. He will also share his perspectives about what planners and other local government officials around the country can do to ensure that their cities and towns become safer, smarter and more competitive in the future.

LOCAL TOURS: Conference attendees will get many opportunities to see exciting model projects in the region. A mix of light rail, bus, biking and walking tours will showcase a range of revitalized and historic neighborhoods, great mixed-use centers and Main Streets, transit-oriented development and form-based codes, complete streets, and light-rail catalysts for redevelopment.

REGIONAL SESSIONS: Many of the conference sessions will also have a Charlotte-area focus.

North Carolina owns and maintains the second-largest state road network in the U.S., and adopted a statewide "Complete Streets" policy in 2009. Jurisdictions across the state are now moving beyond intent to implementation of local complete streets projects. Charlotte and Davidson have been implementing this approach – which moves beyond auto-only street design – on city projects for several years. The session on "Transforming North Carolina from the 'Good Roads' State to the 'Complete Streets' State" examines this transition from policy to implementation from the perspectives of both small towns and large cities.

In the session on "The New Emerging Market for TOD and Urban Infill," local developers will explore how Charlotte's LYNX light rail line running through the heart of South End is the catalyst for transitioning this former industrial district into a true mixed-use neighborhood. Previously renowned as a business district, it is quickly evolving into a great city neighborhood, adding over 2,000 new residential units, triggered by rising demand for urban living, proximity to uptown and four new transit stations. Three South End transit-oriented developments will demonstrate the advantages and challenges to building in an urban transit corridor – from infrastructure and community involvement to incentives and how market forces affect planning decisions.

In North Carolina's Piedmont Triad, a 12-county region made up of a multi-city urban core and more distant rural communities undergoing economic change, the traditional economic drivers are in a state of decline, and a new future is crucial. The "Regional Transit, Sustainability and Affordability" session will examine the Piedmont Authority's recently completed Regional Transit Development Plan to better address the needs of transit riders. The plan is based on increasing community involvement, connecting major employment centers to residential areas, land use/transportation links, and affordability and equity issues.

Davidson and Chapel Hill are home to two of the more progressive affordable housing programs in the Southeast. Davidson's success can be tied to its inclusionary zoning ordinance, while Chapel Hill has worked extensively with Community Home Trust, which has built or purchased 160 homes in the past decade, and Crosland, a developer of affordable housing and mixed-income communities for over 65 years. In the "Getting Results in Affordable Housing" panel, local developers and city officials will cover a range of public-private financing mechanisms and community strategies for building high-quality, mixed-income affordable housing.

During periods of slow economic activity, communities must be creative about land development to maintain and enhance economic viability. The "Successful Multi-jurisdictional Planning Partnerships" session will focus on the importance of regional cooperation and coordination as strategic tools to help communities work together on smart growth initiatives. Gaston County and its 14 municipalities are transforming by creating successful land-use partnerships between local government, schools, the private sector and nonprofits, typified by the County's Unified Development Ordinance and the Multi-County Carolina Thread Trail Plan.

Other sessions featuring success stories from North Carolina and the Charlotte area will cover topics such as flood and watershed management, local food systems, sustainability strategies for small towns and rural communities, regional partnerships, and innovative programs for school financing, retrofits and safe routes.

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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