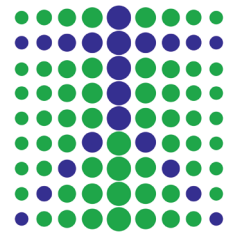




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BUILDING LIVABLE COMMUNITIES: Creating a Common Agenda



**Partners for Livable
Communities**

Livability has become a key element in the agendas of Congress, the Administration, and federal agencies as they make plans to invest in the quality of life, economic competitiveness, and recovery of American communities. However, 'livability' is a broad term encompassing many values and entities, all of which must be engaged to create livable communities across America. This endeavor must begin with a definition of livability that recognizes its many complex elements and the creation of a common agenda upon which to build. Only after a solid foundation for action has been laid can the resources of public and private agencies most effectively achieve livability for all.

Federal agencies such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Transportation, and the Environmental Protection Agency have begun to take steps toward creating livable communities through collaborative engagements. The Interagency Council on Sustainable Communities and the Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities are excellent foundations; however, livable communities are built and sustained only when these key offices and agencies partner with local cultural and civic institutions.

In September 2010, Partners for Livable Communities, with hosting provided by the Smithsonian Institution, presents *Building Livable Communities: Creating a Common Agenda*. This forum is designed to discuss how quality of life, economic development, and improved social services can be achieved through collaborative efforts between government and cultural institutions. The forum seeks to explore a comprehensive livability framework that city, state, and national leaders can reference to revitalize the American community.

The *Building Livable Communities* forum addresses a number of diverse and pressing issues, which are explored in the following pages. To help frame the event within the appropriate context, a background on Partners for Livable Communities is provided, along with a discussion of the word 'livable' and the approach Partners has developed to meet the challenge of building livable communities. As in the forum, current federal livability programs and initiatives are reviewed here, followed by a discussion of the importance of cultural amenities and of the role partnerships between private and public institutions play in achieving livable communities. In conclusion, there is a call for members of the community, whether a government employee or leader of civic institution, to step forward and create an agenda for improving livability.

PARTNERS FOR LIVABLE COMMUNITIES

Partners for Livable Communities was formed in 1977 by Nancy Hanks, then Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, to embody the word 'livability' as a value by which both public and private efforts could contribute to creating better communities for all citizens. Throughout Partners' 33 years, the organization has taken steps large and small to advocate and take action toward community improvement.

In December 1994, Partners for Livable Communities (Partners) convened a national leadership forum with the Smithsonian Institution and the National Endowment for the Arts called *Culture Builds Communities: Creating a Common Agenda*. This forum united all levels of governance to explore how to improve community problem solving by utilizing arts and cultural resources. Since then, Partners has continued to champion livability interests, ensuring that cultural and humanities resources are being engaged to their full potential. Most recently, Partners hosted *Cultivating Creative Communities: Local Solutions for Global Success* in Charlotte, North Carolina in 2006. Building on these past events, Partners joins once again with the Smithsonian to bring *Building Livable Communities: Creating a Common Agenda* to discuss the next steps to defining livability.

Though the term ‘livability’ is all-encompassing, it is comprised of four basic elements. These elements include a community’s pride and willingness to work, jobs and teamwork, human development and regional solutions, and community empowerment. Over three decades of experience, Partners has focused on these four building blocks to develop a unique approach for improving livability. It calls this approach amenity planning, which is characterized by improvements in the physical, historical, cultural, and social features of a place. Investing in community amenities leads to downtowns with a thriving arts scene and a flourishing retail environment, or neighborhoods where older adults can age in place— results with valuable economic and social benefits. Amenities of civic life are not frills; they are essential resources for nurturing people, enhancing places, and creating jobs.

LIVABILITY AT THE CROSSROADS

As federal agencies begin to employ livability as a framework for community development, our nation faces a crossroads, where we must determine which strategies are most effective in ensuring programs and initiatives lead to truly livable communities. Using 33 years of experience on the subject, Partners for Livable Communities seeks to harness this growing prominence of livability agendas in Congress and the current Administration and engage these leaders in discussion to ensure valuable energy and resources focus on the correct path.

THE LIVABLE COMMUNITIES FRAMEWORK

On June 21, 2010 the US Department of Transportation and Housing and Urban Development announced they had joined forces to make available \$175 million in sustainable community challenge grant investments. This marked the first such collaboration between the two federal departments, building on the interagency collaboration, Partnership for Sustainable Communities, of 2009. Guided by six Livability Principles, this collaboration comprises of the US Department of Transportation (DOT), Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). These grants were designed to stimulate planning for more livable, sustainable communities.

The *Livable Communities Act (S.1619)*, once passed, will establish an Interagency Council on Sustainable Development and officially bring together HUD, the DOT, the EPA, and other federal agencies to identify federal barriers to sustainable development at the local level. The Council will coordinate federal sustainable development policies and research agendas and promote coordination of: transportation, housing, community development, energy, and environmental programs. This is intended to eliminate paperwork and bureaucratic delays for state and local partners implementing complex projects involving multiple federal agencies.

In recent years, communities of all sizes across the nation, and not just those affected by deindustrialization, have faced hard economic times. The road to recovery may take longer than once forecasted. Restoring vibrancy to our communities is not just a matter of filling potholes or creating jobs, but of creating a new infrastructure for fostering quality of life and civic engagement. This infrastructure will be the force that drives us through each new economic wave for years to come.

As a nation, we must choose to advance a livability agenda that encourages public-private partnerships and invests in amenities to spur economic growth, embraces demographic changes to promote overall social welfare, leverages traditional institutions for community development, and promotes sustainability. These elements are the measuring stick for a community’s quality of life and resilience.

FEDERAL LIVABILITY AGENDA

Shortly after Senator Christopher Dodd (CT) introduced the *Livable Communities Act of 2009*, representatives in the House followed suit: Representative Earl Blumenauer (OR) launched a Livable Communities Task Force, Representative Steve Cohen (TN) sponsored the *Enhancing Livability for All Americans Act of 2009*, and Representative Ed Perlmutter (CO) sponsored the *Livable Communities Act of 2010*. In response to a call from Representative Jim Oberstar (MN), the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Department of Transportation (DOT), and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) teamed up to promote sustainable and livable communities through integrated planning and investment.

Other federal organizations have engaged in work that could bring new elements to the table for livability. Earlier this year, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) proposed an “Our Town” initiative, which will support design projects and arts engagement strategies to revitalize struggling communities in the fiscal year 2011. The General Services Administration (GSA) Public Buildings Service promotes good architectural design for government buildings; well-designed buildings create a “sense of place” that anchors a resilient and livable community.

REINFORCING LIVABILITY:
VALUABLE ASSETS FOR A NEW AGENDA

The Economics of Amenity

Amenities are the distinguishing characteristics of a place—physical, historical, cultural and social—that contribute to a community’s overall quality of life. An amenity can be as small as a well-designed park bench or as complex as a network of libraries, museums, and arts centers. When combined with the wider range of quality of life elements such as health, safety, education, housing, and transportation, amenities determine if a particular community is a good place to live and work.

The value of amenities is more far-reaching than strengthening quality of life or making cities more attractive. Amenities, when incorporated into a comprehensive urban agenda can strengthen economic and community development, enhance the sense of community, foster pride, stimulate regional cooperation, and provide a valuable resource for human development. City economies grow when the downtown becomes an evening entertainment center, an artistic niche develops to stimulate tourism, or a derelict neighborhood shopping center is renewed as a bustling public space.

Livability for All People

Livable communities provide access to all its citizens no matter their age, abilities, or ethnicity. Livability for all means people at any stage of life can enjoy a fruitful existence at home and in their own neighborhood. Communities across the nation are experiencing rapidly changing demographics due to the aging baby boomer generation and influxes of migrant populations. Communities must learn to adapt to and accommodate these growing populations.

Today, there are more than 35 million Americans age 65 and older, and that number is expected to rise to nearly 55 million by the year 2020—a 65% increase. These older adults are overwhelmingly choosing to stay in their own homes and communities as they age.

This demographic explosion, coupled with new lifestyle choices, is placing pressures on local governments to provide a broad range of new services and infrastructure, such as specialized housing options and community support systems. However, satisfying the needs of an aging population has a positive impact on both the quality of life of older Americans and the livability of the community at large. Retired Americans are community assets that enhance the local talent pool with volunteer hours, stimulate the economy with local spending,

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE
ARTS

Rocco Landesman, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, recognizes the growing importance of collaboration among federal agencies. Therefore, the Endowment has embraced an agenda for building better communities called Our Town. The ‘Our Town’ initiative, proposed on April 13, 2010, supports planning and design projects, and arts engagement strategies for its recipient communities. The Endowment hopes to partner with other federal agencies working in those same communities to discover areas of mutual interest and overlap.

This agenda is based upon Chairman Rocco Landesman’s new guiding principle for the agency, *Art Works*. This simple two word phrase packs a lot of meaning: Art works are the physical objects such as books, paintings, and sculpture; Art works to inspire people to create and aspire to greater heights; Art works—the statement declares arts jobs are real jobs employing real people that pay real taxes thereby contributing to economic growth in an area.

and provide a reliable audience-base for arts and community events. Efforts to accommodate older Americans—such as creating walkable neighborhoods—can improve livability for citizens of all ages.

America is experiencing a second great immigration wave. In 1970, only one in every 25 people in the U.S. was born in another country. Today, one in every eight American residents was born in another country. Unlike the first great wave of immigration at the turn of the 20th century, which was concentrated in urban areas, 21st century immigrants are finding economic opportunities in all parts of the country—Midwest and Southeast, urban and suburban, as well as the traditional immigrant magnets of New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles

These new populations are bringing new needs to our communities. Public schools, for example, are facing more and more pressures to educate a much more diverse population of students. Local and state elected officials are legislating for and seeking the votes of a much more diverse constituency and a more complex web of interest groups. For the school superintendent who has to meet an ever-rising bar for academic achievement with an ever more-diverse student body with growing needs, or the city councilmember who has noticed more and more Latinos and senior citizens at neighborhood meetings and hearings, adapting to new demographic realities is a matter of survival.

Institutions as Fulcrums of Change

Traditional institutions embedded in many communities—libraries, congregations, universities, community colleges, museums, zoos, aquariums, botanic gardens, arts, and humanities agencies—can take on new roles of social service and economic development. They can become “fulcrums of change” for a community, focusing on issues like workforce readiness, revitalizing neighborhoods, serving youth, and promoting healthy living and sustainability.

Many institutions are adapting in structure and learning a new language of community development outside of their traditional field. They are embracing the fact that they are anchors in their physical setting providing public space and programming, cultural and historical context for observers, and vibrant architecture and green space. They are becoming more sensitive to the unique needs of populations such as older adults, youths, families, and immigrants.

Whole communities benefit when museums bring after-school programs into public housing, when libraries assist job seekers with their résumés, when recreation centers offer breakfasts to children, or when schools join arts organizations to provide safe and enriching extra-curricular activities. Local institutions, as intermediaries of economic and social development, must take their rightful place in federal livability agendas for American cities, suburbs, and regions.

CASE STUDY: CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE

The city of Chattanooga, Tennessee has emerged as a power symbol of how effective proper investment in amenities can lead to economic and environmental renewal. In the 1970s, the industrial success of Chattanooga, Tennessee earned the city the designation as the most polluted city in the United States. In an effort to shed this unflattering title, members of the Chamber of Commerce and the City’s Planning Commission formed Chattanooga Venture in the mid 1980s with the goal of restoring the environment and improving the City’s quality of life. Today, after years of public input and over 200 completed and ongoing community- and environmentally-oriented projects, Chattanooga has restored its image as the most livable community in America. With clean air and water, a revitalized downtown and riverfront, new parks and playgrounds, and a dedication to protecting the environment, the city’s commitment to livability has led to major opportunities: in 2009, Volkswagen announced a decision to locate their new North American manufacturing plant in Chattanooga. The expansion will bring 2,000 new jobs to the region and \$1 billion to the local economy.

A CALL TO ACTION

Through decades of experience in diverse communities around the country, Partners for Livable Communities has concluded that livability is a place-based and people-centric strategy. It is not simply a transportation agenda, or a smart growth agenda, or an agenda for jobs, or for the environment. Livability reaches deeper. It is a balanced agenda that takes into account local assets and preferences. As a tool for economic development, livability benefits all segments of a community's resident population; it takes place on a regional playing field, and is based on strategic planning.

Partners believes that collaborations are vital to ensuring scarce federal resources are used to their fullest potential in supporting local goals for livability, sustainability, economic development, labor force preparedness, regional cooperation, and quality of life.

The quality of a city's leadership, the effectiveness of its public and private institutions, and their ability to cooperate—in sum, a city's civic assets—may well be the factor that separates the successful from the unsuccessful cities.

It is imperative that there be multiple layers of collaboration and a diversity of resources to leverage investments in our institutions, in heritage and culture, in the arts and humanities, and in creating a spirit of “can do.” These investments will support quality of life as the critical infrastructure for building confidence and value in distressed communities, no matter what the economic wave or engine. From green to e-commerce to global trade, quality of life is the anchor of our communities' economic competitiveness. Livability, in the broad sense presented here, forms the framework for community excellence and national recovery.

Working groups on livability have formed in federal agencies such as the Public Building Service of the General Services Administration, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Interagency Council on Sustainable Communities of the Environmental Protection Agency, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the US Department of Transportation. These groups could be expanded to include nontraditional partners, with a focus on small grants as agents of major civic and economic change. Let us expand on these government working groups to create strong private-public partnerships focused on restoring the livability of communities across America.