

## *Guest Editors' Introduction*

# **Planning Livable Communities: Findings From HUD's Regional Planning and Community Challenge Grant Programs**

**Denise G. Fairchild**

Emerald Cities Collaborative

**Patrick J. Revord**

Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education

*The views expressed in this introduction are those of the guest editors and do not represent the official positions or policies of the Office of Policy Development and Research, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, or the U.S. government.*

High-quality places to work, play, and raise children are well defined. They provide access to affordable housing, good employment, education, recreation, shopping, and other basic needs and community amenities. They are safe from crime, floods, pollution, and the insecurities of natural and man-made disasters. They are fortified by resilient infrastructure that reliably moves goods, people, water, and energy to homes and businesses. They radiate feelings of belonging and mutual interdependence.

Envisioning livable communities is easier than planning and developing them. Many communities must overcome legacies of rural and inner-city poverty, economic displacement, racial discrimination, and decades of disinvestment. Fostering a strong local economy and improving quality of life for all residents demands a commitment to equitable development to overcome deeply entrenched social and economic divisions.

Unfortunately, our 20th-century planning practices and governing institutions are ill suited for these 21st-century livability challenges. Our current planning and regulatory structures often produce short-term, local, single-purpose solutions derived through top-down planning processes. True livability solutions require both hindsight and long-term foresight that are not limited by economic sectors, political or administrative jurisdictions, or sources of expertise. Most of all,

livable communities require a strong and engaged regional civic infrastructure to solve complicated interconnected problems and to convert legacies of mistrust into mutual interdependence and cooperation.

This *Cityscape* symposium explores the importance and complexities of planning livable communities by examining various facets of the Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI), an innovative place-based planning initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). SCI tested new ways to think about, organize, plan, and invest in communities. Principles of equitable economic development were married with integrated, regional, and collaborative planning processes.

## The Sustainable Communities Initiative

In June 2009, recognizing the national need to build economically competitive, affordable, and long-lasting communities, HUD, the U.S. Department of Transportation, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency resolved to try something new; they formally joined together to form the interagency Partnership for Sustainable Communities (PSC). Guided by a shared set of six livability principles, the three agencies aligned federal housing, transportation, and environmental programs and resources, and they reduced barriers to creating healthy, equitable, and economically vibrant communities (PSC, 2010). Such an interagency partnership was unprecedented, and the alignment of federal policies across three agencies signified an innovation in the way in which the federal government worked with communities.

In the wake of the collaborative creation of PSC, Congress appropriated \$150 million to HUD, establishing SCI. SCI is considered one of the country's largest and boldest planning experiments to confront the full range of challenges—demographic, land use, economic, environmental, housing, and transportation—facing communities. Through 2 years of congressional funding and 6 years of grant management, SCI allocated a total of \$250 million into two grant programs: the Sustainable Communities Initiative Regional Planning Grant (SCI-RPG) program and the Sustainable Communities Initiative Community Challenge Planning (SCI-CCP) grant program. SCI-RPG supported multisectoral, multijurisdictional, and multistakeholder regional planning activities. SCI-CCP grants focused on improving local building and land use plans and projects that met the livability principles. In total, these two programs awarded 143 grants, conducted planning efforts impacting 40 percent of the U.S. population, and leveraged an additional \$175 million of additional public and private funds dedicated to livable and equitable communities.

The SCI experiment required grantees to create new linkages across government agencies and jurisdictional levels; among public, private, and community organizations; between rural, suburban, and urban communities; across stakeholders with different interests and ideologies; and across multiple sectors of the economy. Federal staff and specially identified capacity-building partners worked closely with communities to understand their needs, encourage aspirational and innovative grantmaking, and reduce federal barriers to accomplishing local goals.

Staff and partners met with challenges, however. Communities frequently struggled to address meaningful ways to improve racial equity. They also had trouble breaking through parochial jurisdictional interests to advance regional plans and when moving from planning to implementation.

This symposium investigates the efficacy of SCI in fulfilling its mission of planning livable communities.

## Articles in the Symposium

The articles in this *Cityscape* symposium document what was learned from SCI.

Lauren Heberle, Brandon McReynolds, Steve Sizemore, and Joseph Schilling provide a thorough overview of the initiative's architecture. After highlighting the historical context and rationale for the initiative, they describe the roles, functions, and structure of the boundary-crossing work undertaken by the three federal agencies. They provide details about the two SCI grant programs and about the additional \$10 million grant program providing capacity-building assistance to grantees. They conclude by identifying the unique contributions SCI has made to the field of urban and regional planning; namely, the creation of a robust cohort of communities and practitioners newly adept in regional and inclusionary planning, the use of data and equity standards in the planning process, and the advancement of place-based policies and interagency collaboration to the federal policy landscape (Heberle et al., 2017).

Elizabeth Mattiuzzi's study uses an opinion survey to garner views of the lead agencies from 56 of the 74 SCI-RPG recipient regions regarding the program's effectiveness in two major areas: increased coordination and partnerships, and social and economic equity. Favorable responses were reported with respect to collaboration across different levels of government and the likelihood of continued collaboration. Respondents also noted the importance of data tools for planning. Most communities improved the participation of underrepresented groups. They also enhanced equity outcomes from numerous vantage points, including procedural equity (outreach), outcome equity (institutionalized policies), place-based equity (transportation and housing), and people-based equity (education and jobs) outcomes. However, Mattiuzzi finds that the shift from planning to implementation is dependent on nongovernmental partners to overcome the lack of money, inertia, and political conflict in the public sector. She also cites difficulty attracting community voices and finding a shared definition for equity as common challenges (Mattiuzzi, 2017).

The article from Elizabeth A. Walsh, William J. Becker, Alexandra Judelsohn, and Enjoli Hall takes a deeper dive into the different approaches used to spur transformative relationships in the planning process. The authors hypothesize a direct correlation between civic engagement activities and the culmination of a shared regional vision. They review the civic engagement strategies of 74 communities, categorizing them using the International Association for Public Participation typology of participation, which includes informing, educating, consulting, involving, and empowering. This classification is supplemented by an in-depth study of Buffalo, New York, considered an exemplar in community engagement practice. The authors conclude that an integrated, all-in approach is needed to build a strong civic infrastructure that captures the needs and capacities of various stakeholders. They also note, however, that sustained civic engagement is an ongoing process that works best when long-standing capacities and assets are leveraged (Walsh et al., 2017).

Using case studies of SCI grantees in San Francisco, California, Seattle, Washington, and Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota, Juan-Sebastian Arias, Sara Draper-Zivetz, and Amy Martin seek to understand the impacts of equity outcomes, stakeholder engagement, and jurisdictional dynamics on the regional planning process and culture. Two out of three grantees succeeded in institutionalizing equity into the planning process. They overcame longstanding community mistrust by deliberately defining equity, devolving decisionmaking authority to locals, and addressing equity early in the planning process. The authors find that these three grantees were less successful overcoming jurisdictional competition and fostering collaboration. In one instance, an innovative “submarket strategy” was used to overcome parochial interests and the lack of governing authority at the regional level (Arias, Draper-Zivetz, and Martin, 2017).

Meghan Z. Gough and Jason Reece survey 110 consortia members from regions representing a range of urban, rural, and ideological viewpoints to assess SCI program outcomes. The results are consistent with other findings, including improved community engagement and increased inter-jurisdictional, cross-sector, and nontraditional collaboration. The authors find that barriers to civic engagement include the time horizon of planning exercises, plan relevance, and trust. They also surface ideological barriers regarding regional versus local control and the perception that planning is at odds with individual property rights (Gough and Reece, 2017).

Kathryn W. Hexter and Sanda Kaufman provide a well-constructed case study of the Northeast Ohio Sustainability Communities Consortium. The Northeast Ohio grant was one of most ambitious SCI-RPG projects, involving 12 counties, 5 metropolitan planning organizations, and one-third of Ohio’s population. The authors posit that the use of data and scenario building tools helped to frame the region’s challenges and possible solutions, but a high diversity of needs, interests, and political ideologies complicated deliberations. The region’s efforts were further complicated by lack of prior collaborative history and the absence of committed participation by business sectors (Hexter and Kaufman, 2017).

Finally, Karen Chapple, Grace Streltsov, Mariana Blondet, and Cristina Nape offer a subtle prognosis about the long-term viability of SCI efforts. They suggest that the sum of SCI is greater than its parts. They introduce the concept of “epistemic communities” to the symposium. They argue that merely participating in meetings and in interagency and cross-sector collaboration does not result in the formation of a collective regional consciousness. Rather, forming epistemic communities requires finding shared values, respecting differences, engaging in hard conversations, and sharing boundary-crossing experiences to overcome longstanding political divides and inequality. The authors present three case studies and find that, together, regional affluence and more horizontal (rather than hierarchical) governance structures serve as predictors of epistemic communities that are more likely to adopt plans developed under the grant (Chapple et al., 2017).

## **Conclusion**

The United States is facing increasing challenges of housing affordability, economic disparity, and increasing urbanism. Addressing these burgeoning issues requires a multifaceted approach. By using the strategies of advancing local priorities with federal support, deeply engaging a wide range of stakeholders, and focusing on equitable development, communities can begin to bridge historic

divides and collaborate regionally to enhance citizens' quality of life. Despite the complexity and challenges of aligning these approaches, all the researchers conclude that federal grant programs like SCI help catalyze and institutionalize regional collaboration and further the creation of livable communities.

## Acknowledgments

The guest editors thank the present and former U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development staff members who provided invaluable context, data, and support for this symposium, including Danielle Arigoni, Kevin Bush, Kathryn Dykgraaf, Naomi Friedman, Josh Geyer, Regina Gray, Dwayne Marsh, Sunaree Marshall, and Steven Shepherd.

## Guest Editors

Denise G. Fairchild is President of Emerald Cities Collaborative, a senior fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of California, Los Angeles, and was recently awarded a Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Fellowship.

Patrick J. Revord is a research fellow sponsored by the Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education and stationed at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

## References

- Arias, Juan Sebastian, Sara Draper-Zivetz, and Amy Martin. 2017. "The Impacts of the Sustainable Communities Initiative Regional Planning Grants on Planning and Equity in Three Metropolitan Regions," *Cityscape* 19 (3): 93–114.
- Chapple, Karen, Grace Streltsov, Mariana Blondet, and Cristina Nape. 2017. "Epistemic Communities or Forced Marriages? Evaluating Collaboration Among Sustainable Communities Initiative Regional Planning Grant Recipients," *Cityscape* 19 (3): 163–187.
- Gough, Meghan Z., and Jason Reece. 2017. "The Impact of the Sustainable Communities Initiative on Engagement and Collaboration in Planning: Experiences From Four U.S. Regions," *Cityscape* 19 (3): 115–134.
- Heberle, Lauren C., Brandon McReynolds, Steve Sizemore, and Joseph Schilling. 2017. "HUD's Sustainable Communities Initiative: An Emerging Model of Place-Based Federal Policy and Collaborative Capacity Building," *Cityscape* 19 (3): 9–37.
- Hexter, Kathryn Wertheim, and Sanda Kaufman. 2017. "Planning Without Agency: Vibrant NEO 2040," *Cityscape* 19 (3): 135–161.
- Mattiuzzi, Elizabeth. 2017. "Impacts of the Sustainable Communities Initiative on Regional Collaboration, Equity, and Planning: Results of a Survey of Grantee Regions," *Cityscape* 19 (3): 39–62.

Partnership for Sustainable Communities (PSC). 2010. "Partnership in Action (April)." [https://www.sustainablecommunities.gov/sites/sustainablecommunities.gov/files/docs/2010\\_0407\\_partnership-in-action.pdf](https://www.sustainablecommunities.gov/sites/sustainablecommunities.gov/files/docs/2010_0407_partnership-in-action.pdf).

Walsh, Elizabeth A., William J. Becker, Alexandra Judelsohn, and Enjoli Hall. 2017. "Civic Infrastructure and Sustainable Regional Planning: Insights From the Sustainable Communities Initiative Regional Planning Grantees," *Cityscape* 19 (3): 63–92.