



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Community Development through EPA's Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities Program

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Many of the local governments we assist at the Environmental Finance Center struggle to raise enough money to support their environmental services. Often, we work with these communities to improve the finance and management of their systems through better rate setting, cost controls, and long-term planning. But another solution for struggling communities is to increase and strengthen their customer base through community and economic development.

EPA has a number of programs and resources aimed to revitalize communities through "Smart Growth" economic development, which builds upon existing assets, takes incremental actions to strengthen communities, and builds long-term value to attract a range of investments. In previous posts, we looked at aspects of EPA's Smart Growth initiative including their new *Framework* tool for Small Cities and Towns as well as Smart Growth efforts here in North Carolina. This post examines another aspect of the Smart Growth initiative: the Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities program.

EPA developed the Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities program in 2011 when it recognized that many communities needed tools to help achieve their desired development goals, improve quality of life, and become more economically and environmentally sustainable. The Building Blocks program delivers quick, targeted technical assistance to communities in order to stimulate a discussion about growth and development and strengthen local capacity to implement sustainable approaches.

The program is organized around a series of "tools" which include presentations and exercises to help facilitate discussion, data or information from the community that can be analyzed to help drive the conversation, and an action-oriented process that leads to a set of potential next steps. Communities apply for technical assistance related to these tools that is delivered by EPA staff and EPA-hired consultant teams.

EPA recently selected 25 communities from around the country to receive assistance related to one of five tools:

- Creating Equitable Development
- Planning for Infill Development
- Sustainable Strategies for Small Cities and Rural Areas
- Flood Resilience for Riverine and Coastal Communities
- Green and Complete Streets

Creating Equitable Development seeks to help communities have new development and growth that is equally beneficial to all community members. Since there is concern that new development may displace existing residents, in particular low-income residents, equitable development principles give communities a path to improve their quality of life and economic opportunities while ensuring existing residents are not displaced and can share in the benefits of these improvements, such access to housing, access to high-quality employment, safe and walkable neighborhoods, regional transportation connections, and environmentally healthy communities. Technical assistance recipients develop goals around these improvement areas and then receive training on the next steps the community can take, including the identification of key community institutions and potential partnerships.

Planning for Infill Development seeks to help economically distressed communities revitalize their downtown areas. This tool will help communities that have already identified a priority infill development area and are experiencing some economic growth at the regional level to determine their readiness to pursue infill development and identify strategies to better position themselves to attract infill development. Technical assistance focuses on policies that may need to be



added or changed to encourage infill development, partnership opportunities, strategies to improve the perception of an area, and potential funding sources.

Sustainable Strategies for Small Cities and Rural Areas seeks to help communities evaluate how well their zoning codes, policies, and programs align with smart growth principles. This tool will help participants understand potential changes the community could adopt to promote compact, walkable communities that encourage investment in existing neighborhoods while preserving farmland and open space. Technical assistance focuses on helping communities identify its goals and efforts around various sustainable strategies (such as meeting housing needs for various income levels, preserving natural areas, or promoting active lifestyles) and draws on the experiences of other rural communities across the country that have implemented programs successfully.

Flood Resilience for Riverine and Coastal Communities seeks to help communities prepare for climate change-related flooding and plan for future disaster resilience by assessing local plans, policies, and development regulations. This tool will help communities understand their readiness for flood events and will help communities identify options for updating their plans (such as comprehensive land use and hazard mitigation plans), policies, and development regulations, and applying green infrastructure approaches to become more resilient to floods. Technical assistance focuses on introducing communities to EPA's Flood Resistance Checklist addressing overall strategies to enhance flood resilience, land conservation in river areas, protecting people and structures in vulnerable areas, and plans to encourage development in areas that are less flood prone.

Green and Complete Streets seeks to help communities incorporate green infrastructure to manage stormwater while making the street more aesthetically appealing and safer for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, and drivers. This tool will help communities learn about national best practices around green infrastructure elements such as street trees, rain gardens, and permeable paving as well as how to develop interdepartmental cooperation, maintenance strategies, and funding mechanisms to implement and maintain green streets. Technical assistance focuses on assessing four to six streets within the community and includes options for incorporating a variety of green and complete street concepts and ideas into local practice and setting the policy and organizational framework to implement effectively green and complete street concepts.

This program, and all of EPA's Smart Growth offerings, can help put struggling communities back on the path to financial sustainability.