

Request for Letters of Interest on Technical Assistance for Sustainable Communities Building Blocks

Summary

An increasing number of communities across the United States are turning their attention to smart growth and sustainable communities approaches to development to revitalize their economies, create jobs, protect clean air and water, and improve residents' quality of life. However, communities often run into common barriers when implementing these approaches, such as outdated zoning codes and other local regulations, lack of consensus around where and how to grow, and misconceptions about sustainable communities development approaches. Moreover, many communities may lack the technical expertise needed to make their regulatory environments more supportive of smart growth and the resources to educate local stakeholders about the economic and quality of life benefits these approaches can bring.

Many communities have overcome these hurdles and moved toward smarter growth and more sustainable communities by taking advantage of various standardized, "ready to go" tools that have been developed and tested over the past decade. The Sustainable Communities Building Blocks Program seeks to provide technical assistance to 20 communities on the use of those tools. As a result of this technical assistance, selected local and/or tribal governments will increase their capacity to successfully implement smart growth and sustainable communities development approaches that protect the environment, improve public health, create jobs, expand economic opportunity, and improve overall quality of life.

The Building Blocks Program supports the priorities of the Partnership for Sustainable Communities,¹ a collaborative effort between the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the U.S. Department of Transportation, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The Partnership for Sustainable Communities aims to advance development patterns and infrastructure investment programs that achieve improved economic prosperity and healthy, environmentally sustainable, opportunity-rich communities.

Each technical assistance project in a community includes:

- Public engagement in the assistance being offered, e.g. a meeting or workshop that is open to the general public.
- Direct consultation with a significant number of decision-makers whose work relates to the specific barrier to smart growth and/or sustainable communities development. These might include, but are not limited to, planning, transportation, environmental, and economic development department heads; commissioners; senior staff; and elected officials. The relevant decision-makers will vary in each community and will depend upon the tool being delivered. For example, a "complete streets"-related tool may require meetings with transportation department heads, transportation commissioners, and elected officials.

¹ For more information on the HUD-DOT-EPA Partnership for Sustainable Communities, please see <http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/partnership/index.html>.

- A short memo outlining specific next steps the community could take to implement some of the ideas and suggestions generated during the technical assistance site visit.

The Sustainable Communities Building Blocks Program is geared toward communities that are relatively new to implementing sustainable communities development approaches but that have a basic understanding of the livability principles and how they apply locally. Appropriate Sustainable Communities Building Blocks Program communities recognize that they have development challenges and are trying to kick-start the conversation about how to address a specific local issue.

Technical assistance to selected communities will be provided over the course of one day, with minimal upfront preparation and no formal follow-up. Assistance will be provided through presentations, meetings with community stakeholders, and/or activities that strive to relay to participants the impacts of the community's development policies.

The delivery of the assistance and the relationship between EPA and the community will be as follows:

- a. In submitting a letter of interest, communities will select one of eight tools offered by EPA (see descriptions on pages 4-11).
- b. EPA will contact the communities to schedule a site visit and review details about the program.
- c. EPA's contractors will conduct a one-day visit to the community to deliver the assistance related to the selected tool. This site visit will occur sometime in March through June. A brief memorandum (no more than 3 pages) summarizing the results of the day and the next steps will be provided to the community within one week of the site visit.

EPA hopes to select 20 communities to help test this new technical assistance effort and delivery mechanism. The communities selected in this round will help EPA refine the content and delivery of the technical assistance.

How to Apply

EPA requests letters of interest from communities that would like to receive this targeted assistance. The letters of interest should contain the following information and are limited to a total of two (2) pages (no support information is needed/requested at this time).

1. **Identify the ONE tool for which you are seeking assistance.** Select one (1) of the eight (8) tools described on pages 4-11.
2. **Nature of the smart growth-related problem(s) faced in the community,** including any relevant data to demonstrate the problem.
3. **Relevance of the problem(s) to the selected tool.** Recipients may only select one type of assistance per letter of interest; multiple letters of interest may be submitted, but it is expected that the nature of the problem would change to correspond closely with each request.
4. **Short description of the expected results of the assistance,** i.e., policy change, additional consideration for physical improvements, new incentives, etc.

5. **Short affirmation that the community can provide the information or materials listed in the “What the Community Provides” section of each tool description.**
6. **List of primary point of contact and other key stakeholders who will be involved in the technical assistance work.**

Letters of interest must be submitted via email to [Kevin Nelson](#) no later than **February 23, 2011, at 3:00 p.m.** Eastern Standard Time. If you have questions about this solicitation, please contact [Kevin Nelson](#) (202-566-2835, nelson.kevin@epa.gov).

Selection of Communities

EPA may hold conference calls with some applicants to gain a better understanding of their application. EPA retains the option not to engage a community in such a conference call if their application is deemed incomplete, inappropriate to the task, or otherwise unsuitable for standardized technical assistance at this time. Following these conference calls, EPA will make a determination and select a total of 20 communities.

Role of EPA

EPA will bear full responsibility for contracting the services to be provided, as well as for distributing an appropriate number of the target publications or tools to the community. EPA staff will be integrally involved in the planning up to the site visit, as well as the review of all materials developed in association with the visit.

Timeframe

It is expected that communities will be selected by early March and that this technical assistance will be organized, administered, and completed by June 2011.

Tool #1: WALKING AUDITS

Walking Audits have proven a high and lasting value in thousands of cities across the nation. They help communities address their built environment, leading to a more active and healthy community. The audits can examine 5 to 20 areas of focus, which are chosen by the community.

Community Benefits: Audits will help members of the community develop a common vision and identify changes to make their community more vibrant, sustainable, walkable, and livable. At the end of the day, participants will be using a common vocabulary and will have ideas for both short- and long-term improvements. They will come together on many diverse issues. Walking audits have been shown to help communities build their social capital, focus on areas that they can change, and collaborate on how to bring about meaningful change in the community.

Areas of Focus: The audit can focus on a variety of topics, depending on the community's primary concerns: general walkability and built environment principles; intersection designs, crosswalks, and midblock crossings (getting across the street); Complete Streets; road diets; trees and greening; traffic calming and general speed control; streetscapes; night lighting; placemaking; sustainability and sustainable transportation; active transportation (including transit); green, LEED, rain gardens, and related conservation topics; parks and open space; street connectivity; building placement and mixed use; security by design; on- and off-street parking; retail and social life of the street; and safe routes to school.

Who Should Attend:

- / Community and neighborhood leaders.
- / Merchants and property owners.
- / Elected officials and key staff.
- / Media and other stakeholders.
- / Health officials, regional transportation staff.

How It Works:

- / One-day session begins with a walking audit (typically 1-2 hours) with 15-45 people.
- / Short presentation depicting existing conditions, problems, issues, and needs.
- / A specialist presents tools that address both general and specific community needs related to both land use and transportation.

What Community Provides:

- / Marketing and outreach for one-day session.
- / Local logistics.
- / Local key contact.
- / Materials/ordinances addressing community walkability.

Outcomes:

- / Engaging set of activities and a fun, informative review of community assets.
- / Understanding of issues inhibiting walkability, riding bikes, utilizing transit, and community center reinvestment.
- / Hands-on discovery of those qualities found in communities that can be enriched.
- / Community members build a common vocabulary, debunk common myths, focus on shared values, build or validate common visions, and learn basic principles.

Tool #2: PARKING AUDITS

Parking audits provide a neutral setting where an impartial parking expert can evaluate local policies and practices and offer advice based on the state of the practice, with an emphasis on what works well and what should be avoided.

Community Benefits: Often cities and commercial districts struggle with balancing parking supply and demand in parking policy, requirements, and enforcement strategies. This issue is of crucial importance because parking policy can sometimes create barriers for infill and redevelopment. Good parking strategies can also support a balanced, sustainable transportation system. By addressing all five elements of parking – demand, supply, economics, enforcement, and administration – an audit helps local leaders and stakeholders see the issue in the context of overall growth management and economic strategies.

Areas of Focus: The parking audit will evaluate citywide policies and programs while addressing the parking issues of a specific district or neighborhood. The one-day program is designed to engage key stakeholders, which in the case of a commercial district might include local business and property owners, or in the case of a neighborhood could involve homeowners and residents. The audit will tackle specific issues like fee-in-lieu payments, on-street parking, shared parking, or paid parking, among others. In some cases, a parking audit can also help a community address much broader issues such as petroleum dependency and sustainability.

Who Should Attend:

- District and neighborhood stakeholders.
- Merchants and property owners.
- Elected officials and key staff.
- Media representatives.

How It Works:

- One-day session begins with an evening public presentation, followed by work sessions the next morning and early afternoon.
- A specialist presents and explains tools that address community needs.

What Community Provides:

- Marketing of evening public presentation.
- Invitations to key stakeholders to attend work sessions.
- Local logistics.
- Local key contact.
- Current ordinances and related materials to describe community parking issues.

Outcomes:

- An engaging and enlightening evening public forum providing information about the state of local parking practice nationally.
- A locally-targeted set of how-to tools: ordinances, parking districts, zoning overlays and other strategies.
- Answers to specific technical questions and problems.
- Suggestions for low-cost ways to gather data and estimate demand.
- Community members build a common vocabulary, debunk common myths, focus on shared values, build or validate common visions, and learn basic principles and practices.
- Practical strategies for improving the built environment in ways that bring about increased economic vitality and greater sustainability.

TOOL #3: SUSTAINABLE LAND USE CODE AUDITS

Audits of local land use codes, including zoning and subdivision regulations, are important for long-term, sustainable development patterns and economic growth. The audits provide an assessment of barriers and regulatory gaps in the codes in order to achieve community sustainability goals and to identify potential incentives that might be adopted.

Community Benefits: Audits will help communities assess their local development codes from a sustainability perspective. What barriers do these codes pose to sustainable growth? How can incentives be incorporated into codes to foster sustainable communities? Are there regulatory gaps that need to be filled? At the end of the day, participants will be using a common vocabulary and will have developed an initial list of priority code amendments. They will have a better understanding of the costs and benefits of sustainable code provisions, as well as the tools and knowledge to perform a more detailed sustainable code diagnosis.

Areas of Focus: The focus areas for the code audit can include topics such as renewable energy, energy conservation, climate change, recycling, community health, water conservation, housing diversity, urban agriculture, green infrastructure and water quality, outdoor lighting, and natural resource protection. The presentations and discussions will also cover costs and benefits of sustainable code provisions and implementation strategies.

Who Should Attend:

- / Community and neighborhood leaders.
- / Architects, builders, and developers.
- / Elected officials and key staff.
- / Media and other stakeholders.

How It Works:

- / One-day session with community leaders and staff begins with an overview that answers the questions: What is a sustainable development code, and why undertake a sustainable code diagnosis? (typically 1 hour)
- / Short presentations on the benefits of sustainable code provisions; specific sustainability topics such as renewable energy, water conservation, recycling, and urban agriculture addressing barriers, incentives, and regulatory gaps.
- / Examples of best practices from around the nation.
- / Hands-on working session with local officials to conduct an initial sustainable code assessment and a leave-behind "how-to" manual explaining the steps in undertaking a full sustainable code diagnosis.

What Community Provides:

- / Background information such as local zoning codes and relevant sections of subdivision regulations.
- / Public outreach and stakeholder invitations.
- / Local logistics.
- / Local key contact.

Outcomes:

- / Hands-on initial assessment of local zoning and subdivision ordinances.
- / Understanding of code issues inhibiting sustainable development patterns and growth.
- / Know-how to conduct a detailed code assessment.
- / Tips and advice on implementation strategies.

TOOL #4: SMART GROWTH ZONING CODES FOR SMALL CITIES AND RURAL AREAS

This workshop will offer a menu of “quick fixes” local governments can make to their zoning codes to promote smart growth tailored for small cities and rural areas.

Community Benefits: Identifying hurdles to smart growth in local development codes—and ways to remove them—will help small cities and towns promote community goals, sustainable and efficient development patterns, and economic growth. At the end of the day, participants will understand the basic principles of smart growth and potential code corrective measures and revisions that can be adopted to promote smart growth and sustainable communities. They will develop an initial list of priority “fixes” to their local codes and an implementation strategy.

Areas of Focus: This tool will draw on the forthcoming EPA report *Essential Smart Growth Fixes For Rural Planning, Zoning, and Development Codes* (expected publication summer 2011) and other smart growth publications. Topics areas may include planned unit developments, right-sizing roads, protecting sensitive natural and agricultural areas, rural commercial development, fiscal impact analysis, annexation policies, and conservation development, among others. The presentations and discussions will also focus on implementation issues and strategies drawing on hands-on experience in other communities.

Who Should Attend:

- / Community and neighborhood leaders.
- / Builders and developers.
- / Landowners.
- / Elected officials and key staff.
- / Media and other stakeholders.

How It Works:

- / One-day session with community leaders and staff begins with an overview that discusses the principles of smart growth and some typical disconnects between those principles, community goals, and local development codes. Tips and advice to fix those shortcomings are drawn from best practices in other communities. (1-2 hours)
- / Driving/walking tour of the community to discuss priority fixes to perceived problems on the ground.
- / Hands-on working session with local officials to conduct an initial zoning code assessment and identify 4-6 priority fixes and a strategy for implementing them.

What Community Provides:

- / Background information such as local codes and plans.
- / Organization of workshop and tour.
- / Local logistics.
- / Local key contact.

Outcomes:

- / Understanding of smart growth principles and how zoning codes can help accomplish them.
- / Specific list of local priority code fixes and tips and advice on implementation strategies.

Tool #5: COMMUTER BENEFITS

Congress just extended higher commuter tax benefits, gas prices are rising, and communities everywhere are looking for ways to save everyone money. This workshop will explain to employers, institutions with parking challenges, and other interested community leaders how commuter benefits work and their advantages.

Community Benefits: Commuter benefits allow employees to deduct monthly transit costs from their paychecks, tax free. By incentivizing public transit, employers and communities around the country have reported reductions in single-occupancy vehicle commuting while also reducing costs for employers and employees and demand for parking.

Areas of Focus: The workshop is interactive and includes exercises and activities. Specific elements include:

- Understanding tax law;
- Developing successful programs;
- Understanding employer decision-making;
- Responding to employer objections; and
- Documenting the benefits.

Who Should Attend:

- / Employers.
- / Institutions with parking challenges.
- / MPOs, TMAs, DOTs, and planning agencies.
- / Community and neighborhood leaders.

How It Works:

- / One-day session begins with an overview of commuter benefits: how do they work, and why do people use them?
- / Hands-on examples of how using commuter benefits would affect different paychecks and different kinds of employers.
- / Apply examples to your local needs and opportunities.

What Community Provides:

- / Marketing of one-day workshop.
- / Local logistics.
- / Local key contact.
- / Background information describing current parking issues and public transit service.

Outcomes:

- / Understand how tax savings work for employers, employees, and for employer-paid tax-free transit/vanpool benefits and employee-paid pre-tax benefit programs.
- / Learn strategies for marketing commuter benefits to employers, building business partnerships, and working with employers.
- / Community members build a common vocabulary, debunk common myths, focus on shared values, build or validate common visions, and learn basic principles and practices.

Tool #6: USING SMART GROWTH TO PRODUCE FISCAL AND ECONOMIC HEALTH

Government budgets are in crisis. How can communities save money now, reduce their liabilities for the future, and use scarce dollars to spur economic development?

This workshop engages community leaders in how they can benefit from economic lessons learned by the public and private sectors around the country.

Community Benefits: How can you do more with less? Achieving better economic results from land development and investment can help cities become more fiscally sustainable. Growing research and market dynamics demonstrate that smart growth developments hold their value and that smart growth communities cost taxpayers less to build and run.

This workshop brings you the latest lessons in what saves money for local governments and makes money for businesses and then helps you apply these lessons in your community.

Areas of Focus: Specific elements include:

- How public investments in smart growth stimulate private investment;
- How smart growth provides greater stability in times of economic uncertainty and rising energy costs;
- How smart growth reduces the tax burden; and
- How smart growth investments spur job creation.

Who Should Attend:

- / Elected officials and key staff.
- / Media and other stakeholders.
- / MPOs, DOTs, and planning agencies.
- / Community and neighborhood leaders.

How It Works:

- / One-day session begins with a review of what the recent recession years taught us about what works economically and fiscally.
- / Apply examples to your local needs and opportunities.

What Community Provides:

- / Marketing of event.
- / Local logistics.
- / Local key contact.
- / Background information on the economic conditions and issues of the community.

Outcomes:

- / An understanding of recent lessons from around the country about what saves money and makes money.
- / An understanding of how to use those lessons practically, with application to local opportunities and needs.
- / Community members build a common economics vocabulary, debunk common myths, focus on shared values, and build or validate common economic visions.

Tool #7: COMPLETE STREETS

Policies for Complete Streets ensure that projects respond to the needs of everyone using the roadway. This workshop will help communities better understand how to set new investment priorities, draft a new policy, and tackle implementation challenges.

Community Benefits: Complete Streets policies establish political and community support for routinely including the needs of bicyclists, public transportation users, and pedestrians of all ages and abilities in transportation planning and construction. They ensure all transportation projects create streets that are safe, promote economic growth, support smart growth land uses, and help citizens regularly incorporate healthy active transportation.

Areas of Focus: For this tool, the community will select one of three hands-on workshops:

Laying the Foundation for Complete Streets

- Build a common understanding of complete streets;
- Consider several types of successful policies;
- Compare how complete streets designs use existing right-of-way; and
- Apply complete streets tools to local examples.

Complete Streets Policy Development

- Contrast the elements of complete streets policies with existing policies and internal procedures;
- Identify area complete streets goals and performance measures; and
- Create draft language for a customized complete streets policy.

Complete Streets Policy Implementation

- Assess existing complete streets policy and decision-making process outcomes;
- Identify ways to strengthen policies and the four steps to more effectively implement them; and
- Demonstrate a six-step decision-making process to routinely include and balance the needs of all users.

Who Should Attend:

- / Transportation agency and other city/county staff.
- / Community and neighborhood leaders.
- / Elected officials and key staff.
- / Bicycle, transit, disability advocates, and other stakeholders.

How It Works:

- / All-day working session for key agency staff and stakeholders led by two instructors with policy and engineering expertise.
- / Elected officials and leaders can attend opening session in morning or separate evening presentation.

What Community Provides:

- / Marketing of event.
- / Local logistics.
- / Local key contact.

Outcomes:

- / A new, common vision for transportation projects.
- / Stronger relationships between transportation practitioners and community stakeholders.
- / A draft Complete Streets policy or the steps toward an implementation plan.
- / A clear, locally endorsed path to changing transportation practices to enhance safety and community livability.
- / A framework to change the built environment in ways that bring about increased walking, bicycling, and active living.

Tool #8: CLIMATE ACTION PLANNING

Climate action planning not only reduces greenhouse gas emissions but also can help a community achieve smart growth goals and improve quality of life. This workshop will explain the key steps of planning for climate change while addressing specific community concerns, barriers, or interests.

Community Benefits: From transportation services to land use decisions, control over building codes, and infrastructure investments, local governments can greatly influence the amount of energy used and waste generated in the community. Many of the same strategies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions also save taxpayer money, improve air quality and public health, create jobs and build the local economy, and improve quality of life. At the end of the day, workshop participants will have a clear understanding of the steps needed to create a climate action plan, as well as how planning for climate change can improve a community's triple bottom line.

Areas of Focus: Climate action planning is a multi-faceted process with many steps. The focus areas of this workshop will include: common barriers to climate change planning and how to address them; creating a greenhouse gas inventory and setting reduction targets; communicating about climate change, building public support, and other outreach strategies; sector-specific discussions (e.g., how to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from transportation, building energy, water, or waste); and implementing and tracking process of sustainable communities strategies.

Who Should Attend:

- / Elected officials.
- / City/county staff.
- / Community and neighborhood leaders.
- / Other stakeholders.

How It Works:

- / One-day assistance: morning work session with local government departments and other key stakeholders; afternoon meeting with local government leaders; evening public workshop.

What Community Provides:

- / Marketing of public workshop.
- / Invitations to key stakeholders to attend work sessions.
- / Local logistics.
- / Local key contact.
- / Background information on current and planned sustainability initiatives.

Outcomes:

- / An understanding of the relationship between smart growth and climate change.
- / An understanding of how planning for climate change improves a community's triple bottom line.
- / Identification of barriers to climate change planning and how to address them.
- / A framework to guide the creation of a climate action plan.