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# The Sustainable Communities Initiative

Changing the way communities across the country plan for a prosperous and sustainable future.

# Acknowledgments

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## 1. Introduction

The Sustainable Communities Initiative represents the most significant federal support ever for community and regional planning. Never before has the federal government providing funding for planning that spans the environmental, social and environmental challenges facing US communities. This investment enabled people and organizations in 143 places around the U.S. to work together – across jurisdictions, sectors, all manner of old divides – in broad and deep coalitions toward ambitious goals of vibrant, healthy, livable communities. They were supported by a consortium of experienced organizations helping to build their capacity in myriad ways. The results are innovative and will have lasting impacts.

Each place created a broadly supported vision for the future *as well as* the plans to move them toward that vision. These plans create new visions for: more walkable, mixed-use, diverse communities; refocused economies building on local strengths; integrated environmental protection; and more. Equally important are the 143 partner coalitions that have deeply invested their energy and resources in these plans and are eagerly working to implement them. Some places will see quick success, some have a longer path, and frankly some plans may not come to fruition, OR be fully realized . But collectively, the cross-cutting impact of these plans will be felt for decades in new public and private investment, strengthened economies, revitalized neighborhoods, and more equitable outcomes.

The Institute for Sustainable Communities believes that SCI has created one of the largest integrated approaches to urban planning in a generation – at last, communities are threading the pieces together, realizing the opportunities to link their goals and strategies for jobs, housing, transportation, environmental, and equity. Most importantly, these plans will not just change the communities that created them through this program, but fundamentally change the way communities across the country plan for a prosperous and sustainable future.

As Coordinator of the Sustainable Communities Learning Network, we have had a front row seat to the many innovative approaches and practices of these local champions and their communities. We have seen and helped them reinvent the way American communities plan:

- They created new visions and plans for prosperity that specifically respond to today's challenges and realities — in many places the first shared approach in at least a generation.
- These plans and the process are inclusive of diverse stakeholders and community-driven in key new ways.
- They were built through deep and effective collaboration between traditionally siloed departments, agencies, and organizations.
- Goals and decision-making are built on substantial new data collection and analysis and the supported insights that brings.

### SCI Background

The Sustainable Communities Initiative is a \$250 million investment created by the Partnership for Sustainable Communities - a groundbreaking interagency collaboration between the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Two distinct types of planning processes were funded and supported by the SCI. Some communities received grants to engage in regional planning efforts to address regional issues by using data to set goals, and engaging citizens in decision-making roles. Among the regional planning grants, some focused more on creating a first citizen-driven regional vision, while others with more experience forged ahead to implement theirs.

Others received community challenge grants to engage in neighborhood- or local-level planning to promote planning approaches like mixed-use development, affordable housing, repurposing of older buildings.

In all cases, communities developed a strong collaborative planning process that brought multiple sectors and jurisdictions together into a formal consortium, which guided the creation of a plan based on a comprehensive shared vision of their community.

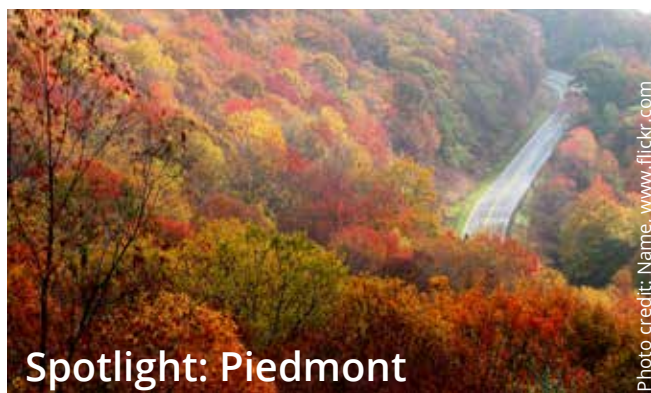
Capacity-building intermediaries – experts in specific fields required for such cutting-edge planning – supported the local consortia in their work, with the Institute for Sustainable Communities acting as the network coordinator.

## 2. The Visions: Defining New Directions for the Future

Our communities, no matter how big or small, how rural or urban, want to thrive and enable their residents to enjoy a high quality of life. A strongly supported community vision that incorporates goals of prosperity, health, safety, and opportunity is the first step.

**SCI has enabled communities across the country to create shared visions for a stronger future.** American communities are facing 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges. Across the country, we see communities challenged by shifting demographics, aging infrastructure, and needs for new kinds of infrastructure. At the same time, they are realizing the benefits of assets that may have been long ignored, like walkable downtowns and neighborhoods and housing that can support all generations and incomes.

Communities are constantly in flux. They experience periods of prosperity and investment, periods of disruption and challenge, and periods of renewal and reinvention. The communities that are most resilient and able to grow stronger as they endure these changes are those that have clearly articulated visions for where they are headed and that periodically revisit and revise these visions.



**Through this initiative, many communities took a comprehensive look at their challenges and developed mutually beneficial solutions.** The comprehensive visions created with SCI investments in many cases represent an unprecedented level of integration across issue areas. In recent years, we've seen many initiatives that take on specific issues related to community sustainability: energy efficiency, health equity, food access, water quality, etc. But a comprehensive vision allows communities to see how these issues relate to one another, identify win-win solutions, and see where they must make hard choices between competing priorities.

**The visions that have emerged put livability at the center and recognize that we can create places that meet the needs of current and future resi-**

**dents in ways that also enable us to have a healthy environment and a robust economy.** At the outset of the SCI program, the Partnership for Sustainable Communities put forth the six Livability Principles. As communities worked to develop their visions and plans, these broad principles have been made real at the local level, underpinning concrete plans and tangible projects.

A common set of themes emerged as communities defined for themselves what it means to become more livable. Concepts like:

- Livable places offer transportation choices and access to employment centers, education, recreation, affordable housing, and retail. Organizations participating in the initiative moved from a focus on transportation and mobility (the ability to move around) to a **focus on accessibility** (the ability to access goods, services, jobs and opportunity). Many grantees, led by local priorities, came to focus on plans for sidewalks, bike paths, light rail, new or improved transit stations, and improved telecommunications as ways of improving accessibility.
- **Livable places are safe and healthy.** We often consider the built environment (buildings and infrastructure) separately from issues of personal safety and public health. But communities in this initiative came to understand and appreciate all the ways that these are inextricably linked. When people feel safe they will walk more, and when healthy food options exist, people will take advantage of them.
- Livable places are loved because they are unique and special. The visions created through these community-driven processes identify and seek to preserve the historic, natural and cultural assets that represent a unique sense of place.

***As community and regional planning organizations have led the development of these plans, they too have developed and recognized ways they need to change and adapt to future conditions.*** SCI has significantly built the capacity of the planning agencies, community organizations, cities and regions that have been involved – at both the individual and the institutional level. The extensive planning efforts provided an opportunity for government and nonprofit staff and community participants to learn about new issues, tools and approaches and to develop new skills. Some of these organizations have changed fundamentally as a result of this initiative: several organizations made the decision to merge and join forces and, in many communities, new organizations came into being to lead the effort forward.

Building such comprehensive visions, managing complex partnerships, and soliciting unprecedented levels of community engagement required the development of new skills, new capacities, and new perspectives. One area where planning organizations reported the greatest learning curve is on the issue of equity. While previous federal planning efforts have included aspects of social equity, the SCI was the first to put it front and center and to provide tools and technical support to help organizations deeply integrate equity into their plans, policies and implementation strategies. Among SCI's greatest legacies will be the many equity networks that have been created across the United States as a result of this work.

### **Why Do Visions Matter?**

- The visions that emerged from the SCI communities break down traditional silos of land, transportation, and housing development and economic development. In working across these issue areas, many communities found win-win solutions.
- Visions reflect new demographic changes and emphasize equitable outcomes.
- Visions reflect new trends, from the wants and needs of millennials and aging baby boomers, to the desire for local food, the trend toward renewed urbanization, and emerging concerns about health and livability in general.
- Visions reflect a recognition that livability is a critical piece of economic vitality – business and workers want to be in livable places.
- In some cases, the planning process revealed that existing plans and policies had created conflicting goals. The integrated approach allowed SCI communities to tackle these conflicts.
- Regional SCI grantees were able to focus on systems and regional connections – watersheds, transportation systems, commuter-sheds and regional housing issues – and identified broader strategies to address systemic problems.
- Visions reflected the desire for lower carbon development and reducing vulnerabilities to impacts of climate change.

### **3. Community-Driven Planning – Working with Everyone**

Planning processes in America often take a top-down approach, with limited citizen input (gained through traditional public hearings) and little or no effort to engage the full range of stakeholders that typically make up a community. However, experience shows that top-down approaches are less effective, less innovative, and often lead to difficulties when it comes time to implement.

***The SCI has developed capacity for inclusive and community-driven planning in communities across the country.*** Moving beyond outreach to true community engagement demanded new capacity, skills and resources. Engagement efforts, whether in the form of online surveys, community charrettes or neighborhood-level meetings, require substantial time and effort from a variety of people: planners need to learn new ways to invite people into the process, while citizens need to participate in new and often unfamiliar activities. Bringing under-served populations into the discussion – who may come with language, trust or other barriers – requires cultural knowledge and strong relationships with community leaders. Other organizations also had or found roles to play to make this all work – neighborhood groups that had previously focused on other issues got more skilled in planning, community organizers found roles, universities found roles, etc.

Fears of resource intensiveness and engagement challenges can make governments and planning organizations shy away from community-driven planning efforts, but the plans developed through these efforts are more productive, more effective, and more likely to succeed. Through SCI, many planning organizations were able to engage in true community-driven planning for the first time. These organizations developed tools for engaging underrepresented community members and the many demographic groups across their regions, supported the development of leaders at the neighborhood and local level, and put citizens at the center of their planning processes. They built connections with community organizations and neighborhood groups that not



only helped them engage citizens, but will be lasting partners for implementation.

Planning teams recognized that engaging citizens is much more than a token/checkbox in the planning process that will have no real impact on plan outcomes. This initiative demonstrated that an effective community-driven planning process results in a stronger final plan, which reflects the needs and desires of all groups in the community, has stronger community buy-in and investment, and is more inclusive and equitable in its execution and outcomes.

### **Why Does Community-Driven Planning Matter?**

- Engaging members of diverse communities results in a more inclusive process, more inclusive execution and final outcomes that better reflect the needs and desires of all citizens.
- Community-driven plans have stronger community buy-in and investment.
- Partnerships with community leaders and organizations can provide additional resources to both planning and implementation efforts.

## **4. Cross-Cutting Collaboration – Multi-Jurisdictional Coordination**

Getting at big outcomes – a stronger economy, a healthier environment, and greater social equity – demands strong collaborative efforts across jurisdictions and sectors at the local and regional scale. In traditional planning processes, a single organization, agency or department develops isolated plans for land use, transportation systems, housing and economic development. Regional planning efforts must work across jurisdictions, which can encompass multiple (and in some cases hundreds of) municipalities, counties, and, in some cases, even states. Regional planning entities almost universal lack authority to implement policy; thus, each jurisdiction creates their own plans and projects, with little or no coordination with neighboring governments.

These isolated planning processes, whether conducted within jurisdictional or sectoral silos, can lead to plans that work at cross-purposes with the plans of neighboring local governments or other departments within the same government. Plans often present conflicting priorities and compete for limited funding and resources.

The SCI has facilitated the development of strong planning consortia at the regional and local scales in communities across the country. Breaking down barriers between departments and governments to create a collaborative planning effort allows all stakeholders to work together to identify common goals and priorities and to leverage shared resources both during the planning and implementation phases.

The consortia that have emerged allow more effective planning and offer strong foundations for plan implementation. By engaging stakeholders across sectors and jurisdictions in their regions and at the local level, communities were able to identify shared interests, solidify regional identities, map regional connections and resources, and create plans that build upon existing programs and successes and set the stage for successful implementation. Inspired by the [collective impact model](#), many communities came to realize that collaboration might actually allow them not just to share (or compete for) existing resources, but to bring in additional resources for their joint efforts.

Collaboration is hard and time-consuming, but when the process is inclusive and stakeholders have buy-in, it can significantly increase regional and community-level capacity for both planning and implementation.

As consortia have been developed and engaged in planning efforts across communities and regions, communities have identified some strategies for creating and maintaining a strong and effective consortium during both planning and implementation.

### **Why Does Collaborating Matter?**

- By breaking down traditional departmental and government silos, communities avoid the problem of isolated plans working at cross-purposes.
- Jurisdictions across regions to discover shared connections and interests and to identify goals and priorities that they can pursue jointly (win-win solutions).
- It not only allows sharing of existing resources and reduces competition for limited funding and other resources for planning and implementation activities, but may actually bring in more resources to partners involved in the collaboration to execute their pieces of the shared plan.

## 5. Data-Centered Understanding

A vital stage of any planning process is the collection and analysis of new data about a community or region, which is necessary to understand both the current state of affairs and the trends that will shape future growth. However, many communities lack the capacity to collect and analyze complex data on their own. Even when good data is available, it is often fragmented or siloed, making it very difficult to develop a comprehensive picture of a community or region.

But thanks to the investments of the SCI and the support of the capacity-building intermediaries, communities across the country have collected and used data in the course of planning efforts, and local leaders will be able to integrate those practices into their planning process and daily activity going forward. With the help of new digital tools, innovative ideas, and more resources, communities have benefited in numerous ways from stronger data.



Better data allows communities to create future plans based on current economic, environmental or demographic conditions. Immigration, internal migration, and economic trends have transformed communities at breakneck speed. Even as these demographic sea changes took place – often resulting in important cultural and economic shifts – communities found themselves making decisions based on the past rather than the future because of out-of-date information. New demographic information and better ways of visualizing it bring these changes to light, ensuring that plans and actions reflect the population as it will be, not just as it was.

Even when no new data is collected, analyzing it in new ways can tell new stories about economic opportunity and how it is achieved. These data sets can also present a challenge, as they can rapidly become so large that analysis or coordination becomes difficult.



In order to achieve efficient collaboration, communities needed to share their fragmented information – critical to the development of a successful plan – from many sources both within their consortia and to the general public. Prior to this initiative, information was cordoned off by jurisdiction, agency, and various databases. Some regional organizations solved this issue by creating centralized clearinghouses for information about their regions. Previously siloed data could be combined and compared, empowering planners to develop truly comprehensive solutions to their regions' challenges. Data warehousing also increases transparency and community involvement, as academics, public interest organizations, and members of the public can access and more easily analyze data for their own purposes.

Some communities have used crowdsourcing to supplement or update their current data resources. Crowdsourcing involves recruiting the general public into the data collection process, using smartphones or even simple pen and paper to record and share information about their neighborhoods. This kind of data collection, because it involves such a large number of data collectors, can inform much more targeted, neighborhood-scale action. Crowdsourcing also has the ancillary benefit of bringing new groups, often youth, into planning. These often overlooked participants bring new perspectives into the process, making it more likely that their interests will be reflected in the final plan. Furthermore, the plan itself becomes more likely to succeed as more members of the community participate, gain buy-in, and become invested in its success.

Communities' burgeoning use of data extends beyond a one-off project. The skills, knowledge, and understanding developed by integrating use of data into the planning process will continue to pay dividends, as individuals bring these skills to new projects and positions. Data collected will serve as a baseline to measure progress, track indicators and foster transparency. Many of the grantees have already outlined indicators to track or



released progress reports. They will continue this type of analytical tracking into the future.

### **Why Do Data-Driven Communities Matter?**

- New insights and critical changes to the status quo come from examination of previously uncaptured data.
- Better data collection and visualization help communities better understand trends and shifts in their populations and environment.
- Transparency and centralization of data allows for greater participation from citizens and partners as well as discovery of unexplored connections between systems.
- Novel methods of data collection allow communities to base decisions on input from a more diverse group of stakeholders – including historically underserved populations.

## **6. Conclusion**

The SCI investments, while modest compared to other federal programs affecting urban development, represent the largest investment in planning in a generation or more. These efforts showed that the elements of sustainable communities apply at regional and neighborhood scale, to large metropolises and rural places. In each of these 143 places, plans and local planning advanced, and ~~overall~~ the practice of planning reached new standards for quality, collaboration, and engagement. The Sustainable Communities Initiative was an unprecedented program in its scope, and also in the demands it made on local and regional community planners to change their approaches. Communities throughout the U.S. were called upon to integrate equity, inclusivity, and SOMETHING into the fabric of their planning process, while simultaneously pushing planning as a practice to a new standard. Communities did not simply develop a single plan, but rather developed an approach to creating and implementing plans that can be applied to any challenge the community may face – now and into the future.

The “soft” infrastructure built by the SCI will continue to support grantees – whether they are creating an ambitious plan for climate resilience or implementing the plans created under this initiative.

The game-changing elements we have outlined are deeply interconnected. They all point grantee communities to new, or previously untapped, sources of information to create a larger picture of how a community, and the decisions it makes, drive the health of the region, state and even nation in which they reside.

Our hope and expectation for the future is that these themes will also drive self-replication in non-SCI communities as grantees broaden their outreach and efforts beyond jurisdictional borders, and other communities see the incredible work performed in just three short years under the auspices of this program.

These new plans will continue to create changes on the ground - new buildings, transportation systems, and other infrastructure. But as importantly, the soft infrastructure built with these grants – the networks, relationships, and capacities – will continue to support communities, whether they are creating an ambitious plan for climate resilience or implementing the plans created under this initiative.

We have outlined four game-changing aspects of planning and plans, but these are deeply interconnected. Together, they point communities to new, or previously untapped, sources of information to create a larger picture of how a community, and the decisions it makes, drive the health of the region, state and even nation in which they reside.

We have already seen, and hope to continue to see, these themes reaching other communities as the success stories created by these grantees reach broader audiences, and other communities see the strong work and

positive changes resulting from the Sustainable Communities Initiative.













