

## Word from Washington: Funding for Sustainability Starts with a Trickle

September 30, 2009

Dear Friends,

I've just returned from a whirlwind week in DC, where I was able to continue the conversation at HUD that I started with Shaun Donovan in June.

I talked in depth with Deputy Secretary Ron Sims, as well as with Shelley Poticha, who heads the newly created HUD Office of Sustainability and reports to Sims. With Poticha in charge, and an appropriation of \$150 million about to be signed into law, things are starting to happen fast.

The fiscal 2010 appropriations bill provides money through the Community Development Block Grant program to "stimulate improved regional planning efforts that integrate housing and transportation decisions, and to challenge communities to reform zoning and land use ordinances."

Of the total, \$100 million is for Regional Planning Grants to support the linking of transportation and land use planning; \$40 million is for Metropolitan Challenge Grants to foster reform and reduce barriers to achieve affordable, economically vital, and sustainable communities; and \$10 million is for a joint HUD and Department of Transportation (DOT) research effort that will include a rigorous evaluation of the Regional Planning Grants and Metropolitan Challenge Grants programs.

Although the budget deficit plays a part in the low funding levels, they are also due to the fact that the funding is for programs that aren't authorized yet.

Sen. Christopher Dodd's [legislation](#) to authorize a longer-term and more extensive program is not expected to be up for a vote for some time. Meanwhile, there is no companion bill in the House of Representatives, and apparently no immediate plans to write one.

The challenge is to make sure that this initial infusion of funding is spent wisely and generates measurable, if not impressive, results. Otherwise, we could end up with another short-lived federal program that never wins sustained Congressional support. Changing land use policies to encourage sustainability will require persistence; we must make sure that we do things right now, in the early stages of these new federal initiatives.

Although the appropriation is good news, it was even better to learn that DOT is doing a 180-degree turn regarding how its highway spending affects urban development. In city after city, federally funded highway construction has encouraged sprawl and undermined efforts at infill development and tended to benefit higher income areas. DOT is revisiting that policy, and, under the new leadership and a spirit of cooperation with HUD, the agency is making a serious effort to consider the impact of its spending on housing affordability and community sustainability.

In conclusion, money is flowing. More important, a new attitude is apparent. And we all can help foster this new sense of cooperative change: Support the Dodd bill. Ask your Congressional representative to support a House companion bill. Make a donation to PSC, which will use your funds to further the cause of sustainable community development.

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