

Government Affairs

“New Community Design” Seeks Solutions to Sprawl *Report asks states to try new approaches to zoning, financing, and land use*



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While the American Dream is different for everyone, governors and state agencies can help create a style of growth that enhances quality of life and the built environment, a new study released this summer by the National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices concludes.

Neighborhoods full of housing, parks, and schools where residents are within walking distance of shops, civic services, jobs, and transit, offer individuals and families alternatives to the “sprawl” that has become a staple of suburban development during the last 50 years, according to the report, “New Community Design to the Rescue: Fulfilling Another American Dream.”

The study finds that about one-third of Americans want to live in places that embody New Community Design (NCD) principles: a focus on real neighborhoods, a strong sense of community, walkable streets, and less dependence on cars, said Joel Hirschhorn, director of NGA’s Natural Resources Studies Division and a principal author of the report. However, the report also finds that these options are rarely offered to homebuyers.

Government policies hinder NCD

The study found that less than one percent of housing offers such mixed-use places. The gap between demand for and supply of NCD, the report says, is a result of government policies that hinder development of NCD projects.

These obstacles include:

- Local zoning laws that prohibit the development of mixed-used projects and that favor single-use projects like strip malls and suburban office parks
- Limited use of development impact fees by local governments, money that should be generated by imposing fees on suburban sprawl developments for new infrastructure like roads, sewers, schools, and other public services
- Building codes that favor new construction over rehabilitating older and often historic buildings in urban areas and older suburbs. The report concludes that these areas are “ripe for revitalization with the New Community Design approach.”



Basic NCD features

NCD can be defined in many ways, but according to the NGA report, the basic features include

- Extensive mixed land use
- Reduced land consumption
- Community centers
- Ample green space
- Transportation options
- Building designs that reflect the local culture and harmonize with the natural environment.

The three types of NCD are urban infill, suburban redevelopment, and new

greenfield projects.

How to succeed

To succeed, the report suggests, NCD needs leadership at the public and private levels. Governors should help the public understand the benefits of NCD by seeking citizens’ input on discussions about growth and its impacts on quality of life through surveys; creating design centers where citizens can see alternative community designs and interact with new digital visualization technology tools to express their preferences; and using visual preference surveys at public meetings for community-based planning and design.

Communities can also use a checklist to evaluate projects, and seek to stimulate news coverage to stimulate public recognition and interest. For example, governors could give awards to outstanding projects by developers or builders.

The report also suggests that states coordinate their support for NCD projects by addressing financial barriers; targeting capital spending, especially in designated growth areas; expediting permits; and making investments in transportation, water resources, and other public services. Importantly, states can help local governments develop and adopt codes that support NCD projects and create parity for regulatory requirements. Several states (Maryland, Minnesota, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Utah) have already adopted model codes for local governments to consider.

For more information, visit www.nga.org. ■