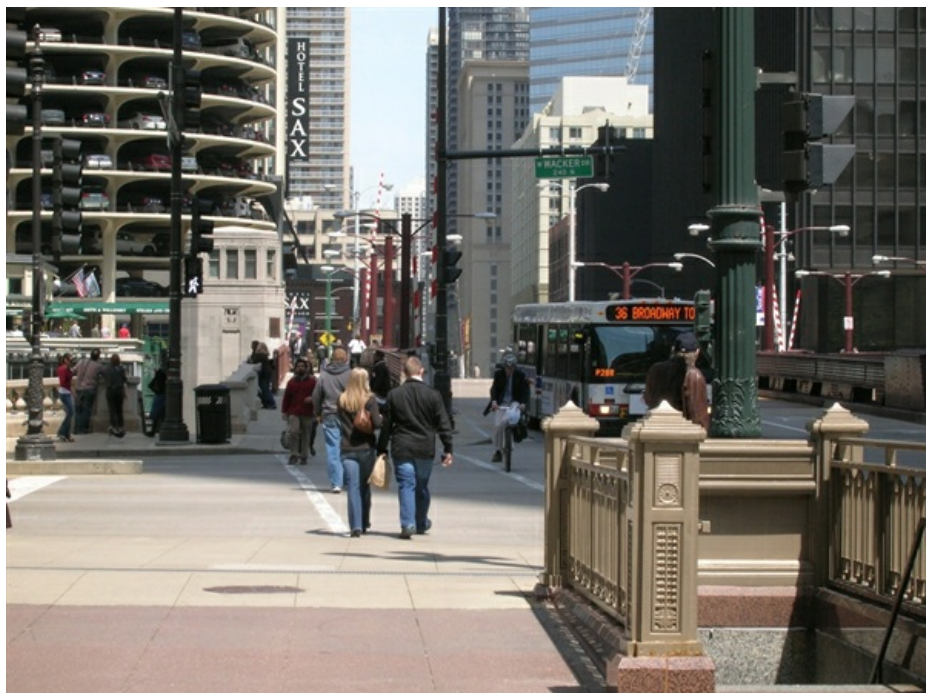


Calling on Congress to create jobs by rewarding innovative regions



By [MarySue Barrett](#) October 6, 2011 [3 comments](#)

All this week, I've been fascinated to hear about the Nobel prizes awarded for astounding scientific discoveries. Humans are capable of incredible innovation. I was in Washington, D.C. a couple weeks ago, I was struck by how hostile that environment is to policy innovation. What brought me to the capital was a strategy meeting organized by our friends at the [Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program](#) and the indefatigable Carl Guardino of the [Silicon Valley Leadership Group](#). Frustrated by progress on issues that are critically important to all metros, we gathered to explore the idea of building a national coalition of regional business leadership associations to advocate together on major public policy issues affecting our nation's economy and communities.

Eighteen organizations spanning the country were represented. We were unified by a sense of urgency, reinforced by the [Census Bureau's new data showing that a record 46.2 million Americans, 15.1 percent of the population, live in poverty](#). Put another way, nearly one in six Americans struggles to afford – and often have to choose between – basic needs like food, shelter, medicine, and transportation. The only sane answer is strategic investments in job creation.

There has been a lot of talk on Capitol Hill about deficit-reduction and tax reform for the wealthy, but to the family on the edge, talk is cheap. While I was in Washington, D.C., I also met with senior staff in Sen. Kirk, Cong. Roskam, and Cong. Biggert's offices. There were attentive to MPC's ideas on a National Infrastructure Bank, workforce stability incentives, and rewards for [efficient, multi-town collaboration](#) and apologetic that the near-term environment was so inhospitable to new ideas.

But MPC takes a long-term approach and new ideas take time to germinate. That's why we were thrilled at the strong participation at a briefing that Sens. Durbin and Kirk helped us publicize. MPC was proud to co-host "[Building Cities, Building Futures](#)," a national tour with a

local focus on how sustainable infrastructure may best serve as a catalyst for economic competitiveness, with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning and the National League of Cities.

So here's what I took away from my strategy discussion with my counterparts from around the country: Communities and regions are turning toward self-help and are far from giving up. Though we are frustrated by bipartisan bickering, we know that real solutions bubble up. By combining our voices, we can do a better job of telling the stories of ways that we are doing and do more with fewer resources. We need our government partners to remove barriers and reward innovation.

For instance, I recently wrote a [column for Citiwire.net](#) about groups of communities in metropolitan Chicago that are working across municipal boundaries to address foreclosures. These clusters of communities developed joint strategies for redevelopment, focused on targeting Neighborhood Stabilization Program dollars to rehabilitate and rebuild affordable homes near commuter rail stations. Their collaboration, and more importantly the efficient community development that is resulting from it, has caught the attention of private philanthropists, leveraging additional resources to stabilize these areas and attract more economic activity.

Congress ought to take note of local innovation, and direct more flexible funding to regions so that we can scale up creative solutions. One opportunity is to authorize a National Infrastructure Bank, which would direct investment to multi-purpose infrastructure projects that have been endorsed by regional plans (such as GO TO 2040 in Northeastern Illinois, or the Northwestern Indiana Planning Commission's 2040 Comprehensive Regional Plan, or the Regional Development Authority's Comprehensive Economic Development Plan). Because this region has done its homework and is "ready for prime time" in leveraging new financial tools, I volunteered to assist my national colleagues on a coordinated infrastructure agenda. Stay tuned for what we will be focusing on.