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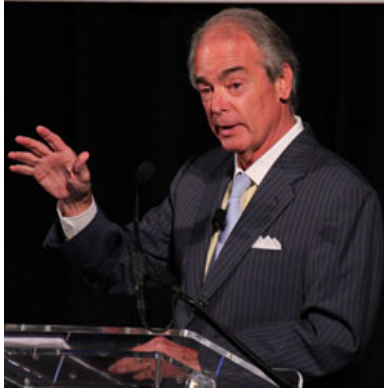
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Charlotte, N.C., Chicago Host Infrastructure Forums

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by Julia Pulidindi



In July of this year, NLC with sponsorship from Siemens, an NLC Corporate Partner, kicked off a nationwide tour, Building Cities, Building Futures, a series of forums that brought regional stakeholders together to discuss the impact of sustainable infrastructure on economic development. The series concluded this month with stops in Charlotte and Chicago.

The goals of these forums were to provide networking opportunities, create visibility and draw attention to infrastructure needs in major metropolitan areas and bring together business and community leaders to build on their successes and create momentum for the future.

With direction from the City of Charlotte, the forum there focused on water and energy and featured a variety of national and local experts. James Rogers, chairman of the board, president and chief executive officer of Duke Energy, headquartered in Charlotte, opened the morning by setting the stage on water and energy issues in the region. "I will start with a simple but profound statement: water is tomorrow's oil. It is a precious, limited resource that is becoming more valuable and vital."

Rogers' remarks opened up a day-long discussion of the various water issues the Charlotte region is facing and how they are moving forward to address them.

The audience was polled on what they saw were the biggest water infrastructure issues in the area and what would be the best ways to address them. The majority of the respondents reported that regional collaboration and public-private partnerships were integral in addressing the region's water supply and conservation needs. In addition, the audience cited the lack of better community engagement and regional collaboration as the biggest obstacles to successfully addressing this problem.

Participants dug deeper into the Charlotte region's water issues, particularly policy implications and climate change, before switching gears and focusing on energy. With a goal of reducing energy use in the urban core by 20 percent, Michael Smith, president and chief executive officer of Charlotte Center City Partners, highlighted that this was "...an incredible opportunity for Charlotte to become a city on the east coast renowned for environmental awareness."



The day ended with a discussion among the participants on lessons learned and how to move forward from the day's events. Continued efforts to build collaboration between stakeholders and create successful partnerships were mentioned by many as the most important action to take to build a stronger water infrastructure system in the region.

The topics of interest at the Building Cities, Building Futures event in Chicago were transportation and water, though with a different perspective and different needs.

The Chicago region has been very successful with regional collaboration on several levels. The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) and the Metropolitan Planning Council (MCP) — partners with NLC in developing the programming for the event — actively engage their members in planning decisions. The Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency Program brings together the U.S. Department of Transportation, the State of Illinois, City of Chicago, Metra, Amtrak and the nation's freight railroads to increase and improve the efficiency of the region's passenger and freight rail systems. The Metropolitan Mayor's Caucus is a successful initiative that brings 272 mayors in the region to come to consensus on major decisions that need to be made.

The participants at the Chicago event were similarly polled for their opinions on the region's top infrastructure needs, obstacles and solutions.

While regional collaboration was highlighted as the most important solution in Charlotte — and incidentally, Houston and Los Angeles, as well — Chicago has a very different response. Funding — from public-private partnerships and state and federal sources — ranked as the

greatest need and solution to their water and transportation infrastructure needs. Rob Puentes, senior fellow of the Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution, followed up these results with remarks further defining the problem as not only a lack of investment, but needing to set national goals.

“[The] message in America is we are too broke to make similar investments to what we did in the past,” Puentes said. “I believe this message is wrong. The problem isn’t just that we aren’t spending but we aren’t spending as wisely as we could. We do not have national goals ... we get bridges to nowhere, etc. We can’t afford to do this anymore with [the] economy struggling. We want mobility that comes from cars and planes but we also want to reduce energy use. We want new transit systems but communities block density increases.”

Breakout sessions on transportation and water further looked into the benefits and pitfalls of alternative financing mechanisms such as public-private partnerships and shared revenue systems and how these not only help fund infrastructure projects, but can have a profound impact on the regional economy through job creation.

During the lunch keynote address, Michael Pagano, dean of the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs and professor of public administration at the University of Illinois at Chicago, highlighted the fact that the need for funding doesn’t stop once an infrastructure project is complete, but must be sustained to maintain the infrastructure over the course of its lifespan.

“We have forgotten micro-economics. We are good at building and photo opportunities but we have poor understanding of what it takes to adequately maintain an asset,” Pagano said. “Taxpayers are told that a bridge costs \$50 million but the real cost is \$200 million. We are an overbuilt nation with more infrastructure than we need. We price based on opening costs and not maintaining it over its useful life.”

The afternoon discussion session in Chicago focused on regional collaboration. A viable platform to bring stakeholders together exists within the structures of CMAP and MPC, but because of a lack of authority for these entities, projects don’t move as swiftly as they could.

Peter Skosey, vice president of MPC, said, “CMAP does best with the tools it has. The Northwest Indiana Regional Development Authority was founded at the same time as CMAP by state statute. It is not an MPO but gets \$30 million a year from gambling, etc. to leverage other federal and local dollars on a very clear set of priorities — Gary Airport, lakeshore improvements, etc. Perhaps CMAP needs some type of funding stream to help with implementation of Go To 2040.”

The day ended with additional discussion among the various stakeholders from the public and private communities.

Details: For more information on the Building Cities, Building Futures tour, please visit www.nlc.org/building-cities.