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1 Comment

Sustainability Busts Out of Its Cubicle, Permeates DOT, HUD, and EPA

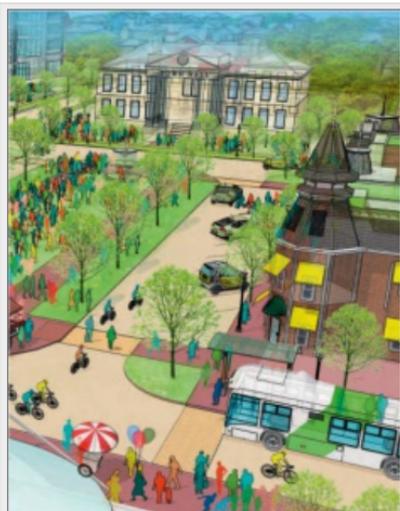
by Tanya Snyder

The Partnership for Sustainable Communities has had a rough couple of years. The program got [zeroed out of the 2012 budget](#), and the 2013 budget is just a carbon copy of 2012. But they're looking to make a comeback.

The three-agency partnership celebrates its fourth anniversary in June. In those four years, the collaborative effort among U.S. DOT, HUD, and EPA has entrenched and strengthened the Obama administration's multi-disciplinary approach to smart growth, weaving together transportation, housing, and environmental policy. The partnership's grants and technical assistance have helped transform communities and make them more economically and environmentally resilient.

In that vein, HUD's Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities — the mothership of the whole program — is becoming the Office of Economic Resilience, embedded within an existing HUD program called Community Planning and Development. That could help preserve the sustainability work, since it'll now be part of a program that Congress hasn't targeted for cuts.

Politics aside, Shelley Poticha, the director of the program, said the move is designed to comply with two requests from Congress: 1) a name that more accurately reflects what the grants are for, and 2) to embed their approach throughout the agency to leverage other formula funding.



The Partnership's Regional Planning Grants -- before Congress de-funded them -- supported sustainability efforts like Chicago's "GO TO 2040" regional plan. Image: [CMAP](#)

And that may be the true significance of the move. The office is increasingly setting the tone for the way the entire agency does business, and how it spends its entire \$47.6 billion budget. (That's what it's requested for 2014, anyway — it's \$10 billion more than the agency will spend this year.)

[As we reported last year](#), the three agencies were already bringing sustainability into the heart of their work. The [six principles of livability](#) they've agreed on don't just govern the grants given by the Office of Housing and Sustainable Communities; they've become the guiding philosophy behind much of the agencies' work — and other agencies, like NOAA and USDA, are tagging along for the ride, too.

So there are lots of good reasons to better enmesh the sustainability office in the agency. Besides, Poticha said, HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan had always planned for the sustainability office to "find the most appropriate home within the agency among the core program offices." She also said the larger staff network will allow them greater flexibility and additional capacity than the small office they have now.

The [Regional Planning and Community Challenge grant programs](#), administered by HUD with the collaboration of the other two agencies, are being rolled into one budget item, a \$75 million grant program now called Integrated Planning and Investment Grants. HUD officials are still unclear whether they'll continue to separate that into two programs or leave it as one.

However, it's worth noting that the whole reorganization will only happen if Congress actually passes a budget — and that's a big "if" these days.

The basic shape of DOT's livability work stays largely the same in [its 2014 budget request](#): It's asking for \$40 billion for a [fix-it-first infrastructure program](#), \$10 billion for competitive grant programs including TIGER (\$4 billion), transportation leadership awards (\$2 billion), rail service improvements (\$3 billion), and next gen in aviation (\$1 billion). DOT's budget also includes \$40 billion for the rail reauthorization [\[PDF\]](#), though the department hasn't yet released a bill draft to add policy prescriptions to that budget. They're also still pushing an infrastructure bank and bonds.

EPA, for its part, plans to “scale up the technical assistance that we do, trying to meet the demand from communities for assistance in how [to grow] in a smarter and most sustainable way... most of which we do in concert with our partners at HUD and DOT,” said John Frece, director of EPA’s Office of Sustainable Communities.

Frece said they’re also improving location efficiency within the federal government, collaborating with the General Service Administration (the “[landlord of the federal government](#)”) to find sites for future federal facilities that are walkable and accessible to transit.

The sustainability ethic isn’t just permeating all of the agencies’ programs, but even their internal culture. Just yesterday, [U.S. DOT presented an internal sustainability award](#) to the Federal Bike To Work Challenge, jointly started by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the EPA. The event last May included 20 agencies with 522 riders. “The roster of 96 teams for this year’s challenge — 20 of them from DOT alone — promises to shatter that achievement,” according to Secretary LaHood.