



NARC

Building Regional Communities

National Association of Regional Councils

1666 Connecticut Avenue, NW Suite 300

Washington, DC 20009

202.986.1032 (tel) 202.986.1038 (fax)

www.NARC.org

Written Statement for the Record

Hearing on
“Local Perspectives on the Livable Communities Act”

Before the U.S. Senate
Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs
Washington, DC

From
Dr. Lyle D. Wray
Executive Director, Capitol Region Council of Governments
On Behalf of
The National Association of Regional Councils

Wednesday, June 9, 2010



NARC

Building Regional Communities

National Association of Regional Councils

1666 Connecticut Avenue, NW Suite 300

Washington, DC 20009

202.986.1032 (tel) 202.986.1038 (fax)

www.NARC.org

Good morning and thank you, Chairman Dodd, Ranking Member Shelby and distinguished members of the Committee. I am honored to be before you to testify on the vital role the Livable Communities Act would have within communities and regions of all sizes and make ups nationwide, focusing on my region, the Greater Hartford, Connecticut region as one local perspective boasting great opportunity for implementation of the Livable Communities Act.

My name is Lyle Wray and I serve as Executive Director of the Capitol Region Council of Governments (CRCOG) in Hartford, Connecticut, and also serve on the Executive Directors Council of the National Association of Regional Councils (NARC). Today, on behalf of NARC, I am here to demonstrate the need for and stress the importance of authorizing the Livable Communities Act to meet the growing demands of communities and regions nationwide.

The National Association of Regional Councils is a non-profit trade organization that serves as the national voice for regionalism, advocating for multi-jurisdictional cooperation as the most effective way to address community planning and development opportunities and challenges. NARC is governed by local elected officials and represents member regional planning organizations composed of multiple local governments that work together to improve America's communities - large and small, urban and rural. Through advocacy and assistance, NARC's mission is to increase funding and authority for all regional councils (RCs) and metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), regardless of their size or location, and to strengthen American regions and communities in transportation, economic and community development, homeland security, and the environment – integrating fundamental planning and implementation functions within these core areas.



NARC

Building Regional Communities

National Association of Regional Councils

1666 Connecticut Avenue, NW Suite 300

Washington, DC 20009

202.986.1032 (tel) 202.986.1038 (fax)

www.NARC.org

Regional councils deliver an array of federal, state and local programs that provide planning support and technical assistance to local governments. The national network of regional councils includes organizations such as Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO), Councils of Government (COG), Rural Planning Organizations (RPO), Economic Development Districts (EDD) and Local Development Districts (LDD). Regional councils are either created by compact and/or enabling legislation or as voluntary consortia of local governments. Our mission is the delivery of services and programs for economic development, first responder and 911, health care, infrastructure development, aging services, air and water quality, land-use and long-range planning, economic and workforce development, data collection, transportation planning and the coordination of multiple plans into one coordinated, comprehensive plan at a regional level. As such, regional councils are responsible for much of the planning and programming of federal, state and local dollars.

NARC's members, CRCOG included, support Chairman Dodd's efforts to promote "livable communities" by creating and maintaining robust federal investment in locally-driven, regionally-focused comprehensive regional plans and the implementation of those plans that patch together transportation, the environment, housing and economic development opportunities within and among communities in rural and urban, large and small communities. In pursuing livability from the federal perspective, NARC supports the Act's voluntary, competitive and incentive-based approach to promoting comprehensive regional planning and implementation that allows each region to meet broad, federally-established goals by setting regionally-driven objectives based on consensus and a shared regional vision. These objectives, initiated by local government and strong public involvement, would be able to address new and existing challenges, advance regional collaboration, and leverage a region's assets to compete in a new global economy. Tailored to a region's needs and composition, livability initiatives generally should seek to highlight a



NARC

Building Regional Communities

National Association of Regional Councils

1666 Connecticut Avenue, NW Suite 300

Washington, DC 20009

202.986.1032 (tel) 202.986.1038 (fax)

www.NARC.org

region's core strengths while coordinating land use, transportation, the environment, energy, economy/economic development, social welfare, housing, and public safety issues – in order to properly balance growth, improve the overall quality of life and maintain vibrant local and regional economies. The Act recognizes and supports this bottom up approach that informs a federal process and links the cross-purposes of various federal agencies and programs.

Regional planning organizations like CRCOG are today's "boots on the ground" planners and implementers of tomorrow's regional infrastructure, economies and opportunities. In order to continue our successful efforts, regional planning organizations need a robust federal partner, decisive federal leadership and increased flexibility, funding and resources within federal programs like what is offered in the Livable Communities Act to help make long lasting community investments that promote holistic growth and an achievable, sustainable future.

Mister Chairman, the convergence of a softening economy, declining federal and state funds, rising unemployment, forecasted population growth, increased environmental concerns and the clear need for substantial investments in the country's infrastructure, communities require a realignment through comprehensive regional planning activities that spur livable, sustainable and vibrant communities. The question is – how can Congress best direct funding to provide family-wage jobs, while stimulating innovation and entrepreneurship, and offering a wealth of cross-linked options within housing, transportation, environment and economic opportunity? One answer is through the authorization and funding of the Livable Communities Act. Let me offer some thoughts on the Act, and CRCOG region as a successful example comprehensive regional planning and implementation progress.



NARC

Building Regional Communities

National Association of Regional Councils

1666 Connecticut Avenue, NW Suite 300

Washington, DC 20009

202.986.1032 (tel) 202.986.1038 (fax)

www.NARC.org

Capitol Region Council of Governments

My organization—the Capitol Region Council of Governments (CRCOG)—is one of Connecticut’s 15 regional planning organizations. We are established under the authority of the Connecticut General Statutes to serve as voluntary associations of local governments and regional planning agencies for our areas of operation. The Capitol Region serves the City of Hartford and the 28-surrounding suburban and rural communities, with a population of nearly 750,000 people. CRCOG is also the MPO for transportation planning purposes under the authority of federal transportation legislation. The scope of our regional planning activities and programs include the following areas: transportation (including transit, bicycle and pedestrian initiatives, and environmental justice), housing, land use, environmental protection, open space and farmland preservation, municipal services, and public safety and homeland security (including pre-disaster natural hazard mitigation planning).

A well-planned, coordinated and comprehensive regional plan supports a strategic vision for community and economic development and opportunities, and supports more efficient and effective distribution and use of public dollars. We are very excited about the Livable Communities Act, and its potential to forward integrated planning and investment decisions in support of sustainable community development. The benefits of such comprehensive and coordinated planning and investment are greater choice and convenience for our residents, and socially, economically and environmentally strong and vibrant communities.

In the metropolitan Hartford region, we believe that this program will be particularly useful in helping us move forward with **planning for transit oriented development** associated with two major transit projects worth about 1.5 billion dollars about to implemented here: the New Britain to Hartford Busway, and the



NARC

Building Regional Communities

National Association of Regional Councils

1666 Connecticut Avenue, NW Suite 300

Washington, DC 20009

202.986.1032 (tel) 202.986.1038 (fax)

www.NARC.org

New Haven to Springfield Commuter Rail. It will also be useful in forwarding planning and redevelopment within other transit corridors in the region, as well as selected sites that have good access to on-street bus service.

CRCOG and some of the communities along these transit corridors have already completed preliminary station area plans that focused on conceptual site design and assessing market opportunities in proposed station areas, and identifying possible strategies to encourage development. We have also worked with towns to develop and adopt transit oriented development principles that can be used to guide future planning and development. Through our EPA-funded MetroHartford Brownfields Assessment Program, we have helped communities conduct environmental site assessments and remedial action plans for sites near proposed stations, which will be used to assist in municipal and/or private redevelopment efforts. We anticipate that Livable Communities Act planning and implementation funds can help us move these plans to reality by supporting the integration of planning and development within whole transit corridors, and the development of more detailed station area plans at specific sites.

The Livable Communities Act acknowledges that coordinated regional and municipal planning is necessary to create strong, sustainable communities. It is the regional, corridor-level planning and coordination that will help us to implement consistent, transit supportive development principles, and consider how the individual municipal activities will be related. It will also help guide public investment decisions. But we also need to incorporate the regional planning and principles into the municipal level site planning, zoning and subdivision codes that will control how land is developed, and how private infrastructure investments are made. Our ultimate goal is to develop regional plans and local zoning codes for mixed use development that will link jobs, affordable and market-rate housing, and pedestrian



NARC

Building Regional Communities

National Association of Regional Councils

1666 Connecticut Avenue, NW Suite 300

Washington, DC 20009

202.986.1032 (tel) 202.986.1038 (fax)

www.NARC.org

and bicycle systems within a half-mile radius of proposed stations along the new bus rapid transit and commuter rail systems—for the economic and social benefit of the region as a whole. CROG is also studying other transportation corridors within the region, and this program will provide an opportunity to apply model codes that better connect a variety of land uses and transportation in other areas where on-street bus service, housing and economic development opportunities are closely linked.

We are also very interested in **integrating sustainable design and development practices** into the development and redevelopment that will likely occur along the Hartford-New Britain Busway, the Springfield-New Haven Commuter and High-Speed Rail Line, and other areas of the region that are well-served by on-street bus service and water and sewer infrastructure.

In 2008, we were fortunate to receive an award of Smart Growth Implementation Assistance from the U.S. EPA to explore how the principles of sustainable, mixed use development could be incorporated into the Incentive Housing Zones being developed in the region through the Home Connecticut Program, and other community planning efforts. The end product of our collaboration with EPA and four of our member communities was an interactive workshop and the development four separate reports that speak to how sustainable development guidelines can be applied to help towns and developers:

- Select prosperous smart growth locations for housing and economic development;
- Implement neighborhood design and placemaking that creates vibrant, walkable neighborhoods;
and,
- Apply green infrastructure and energy efficient building techniques to new and rehabilitated development, in order to help reduce carbon emissions in the region.



NARC

Building Regional Communities

National Association of Regional Councils

1666 Connecticut Avenue, NW Suite 300

Washington, DC 20009

202.986.1032 (tel) 202.986.1038 (fax)

www.NARC.org

During the same time period, we collaborated with the Regional Plan Association on another project that looked at what impact changing development patterns within transit corridors can have on reducing carbon emissions. The final report of that effort, **Growing Economy, Shrinking Emissions (2009)**, reinforced the point that by developing in a more compact manner within transit corridors, we, as a region, can achieve real, positive impacts on reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the five percent to 20 percent reduction range.

We believe that the Livable Communities Act can help us develop models that will help towns apply the CRCOG/EPA sustainable development guidelines to projects throughout the region—so that we may begin to address our long-term climate change goals.

Sustainable Capitol Region

CRCOG recently created a new **Sustainable Capitol Region** initiative whose mission is to “develop and support integrated regional approaches to planning, projects and investments that will promote vibrant, healthy communities, protected natural resources and open spaces, equitable access to opportunities and an economically competitive Capitol Region to serve all our citizens today, and in the future.” This initiative ties together the good work already being done by CRCOG and others in the areas of community development, transportation, economic development, environmental protection, public safety, homeland security, cooperative purchasing and municipal service sharing. **Sustainable Capitol Region** will provide the umbrella which CRCOG and a diverse range of community partners can work together to ensure that our collective planning for and investments in the greater Hartford area can be harnessed to create strong, sustainable and livable communities. The Livable Communities Act holds great promise for our region, through providing much-needed grants to help us better coordinate the planning currently



NARC

Building Regional Communities

National Association of Regional Councils

1666 Connecticut Avenue, NW Suite 300

Washington, DC 20009

202.986.1032 (tel) 202.986.1038 (fax)

www.NARC.org

underway, as well as funding to implement strategic projects that will ultimately build a more sustainable Capitol Region.

Authorizing the Livable Communities Act (LCA)

The authorization of the Livable Communities Act (LCA) is essential, particularly in these difficult economic times, for linking proven, cost-effective programs, and reinforcing the efficient investment of federal resources through comprehensive regional planning and implementation initiatives. These efforts ensure appropriate community involvement to coordinate long term planning, and improve organizational effectiveness, stronger environmental management, reduced costs and time to complete regional projects, as well as a multitude of other benefits that can drive regional economic growth and opportunity.

Regions are incubators of economic development by drawing on the collective strength of cities, counties and towns across a geographic region. CRCOG and its fellow regional planning organizations are recognized as experienced partners, consensus builders, community leaders and program managers. We convene local and multi-jurisdictional government leaders with businesses to support rural, suburban and urban workforce development activities. We have a proven record for administering local, state and federal funds and programs that bolster economic vitality. Our organizations develop innovative approaches and replicable practices that support strategic investments for sustainability and growth agendas in the nation's communities. The LCA would provide the groundwork and federal commitment to further regional and local activities by placing national emphasis on the integration of strategic regional transportation, economic, environmental, land use and housing planning objectives, breaking down silos, and streamlining processes to encourage cross-cutting, regional efforts.



NARC

Building Regional Communities

National Association of Regional Councils

1666 Connecticut Avenue, NW Suite 300

Washington, DC 20009

202.986.1032 (tel) 202.986.1038 (fax)

www.NARC.org

From our experience, we believe the local government supported network of regional councils like CRCOG, with our broad spectrum of issues and expertise in programming federal, state and local funds and services, are a natural vehicle through which the federal government can realize efficiencies in delivering federal programs. We believe such economies of scale, market penetration and peer-to-peer learning that can be achieved on a regional level will strengthen communities and help galvanize sustainable community or livability initiatives throughout the country. NARC sees the LCA as helping to advance this, and providing a multitude of benefits for citizens, businesses, community stakeholders, local and state governments, and the federal government. Most simply stated, the LCA:

- Reaffirms the federal role in regionalism;
- Helps coordinate regional assistance programs;
- Provides for federal interagency coordination and meetings;
- Assists in determining a federal livability framework;
- Is inclusive of regions and local governments of all sizes and make ups;
- Is voluntary and provides incentives for locally-determined sustainable growth strategies and activities;
- Establishes competitive comprehensive regional planning and implementation grants;
- Promotes regional and local cooperation and service sharing;
- Ensures land use/zoning requirements do not impede upon local decision-making; and,
- Provides for transparency, accountability and replicability.

Under the LCA, a livable community is defined as one that provides safe and reliable transportation choices, and affordable, energy efficient housing; supports public health and economic development; and, preserves natural, agricultural, and environmental resources. This broad, malleable definition allows for



NARC

Building Regional Communities

National Association of Regional Councils

1666 Connecticut Avenue, NW Suite 300

Washington, DC 20009

202.986.1032 (tel) 202.986.1038 (fax)

www.NARC.org

the Act to fund goals, strategies and outcomes that are flexible and locally derived through community stakeholder and citizen input. The LCA recognizes that communities of all sizes, make ups and capabilities are an important part of the national landscape, economy and future. Opportunities offered in the LCA will provide regional planning organizations, local governments, businesses, community groups and citizens alike the resources and collective capabilities to exercise choice in the ways we nurture, enhance and protect our large metropolitan areas, as well as our rural and small communities to ensure the unique characteristics, histories, offerings and needs and wants are preserved for generations to come.

The LCA could provide critical assistance to communities in areas such as:

- **Economic Development:** The LCA provides flexible grant opportunities to stimulate local economic growth. Communities are encouraged to seek out collaborative partnerships across regions, cities, and towns to engage regional economic development strategies that can help direct resources and funding more efficiently and effectively throughout a region. The LCA would also support regional economic development initiatives through workforce training and increasing the technology infrastructure of a region (i.e. increased broadband access), as rural regions require increased access to jobs, education and training, as well as up-to-date technological resources for retaining a strong workforce.
- **Job Creation:** The LCA would provide new resources to communities to spur economic development, stimulate commercial and industrial growth, attract new businesses and jobs, and incentivize innovation. The Act would encourage local governments and regions to develop local business and innovation clusters that provide industry incentives for entrepreneurship, apprentice



NARC

Building Regional Communities

National Association of Regional Councils

1666 Connecticut Avenue, NW Suite 300

Washington, DC 20009

202.986.1032 (tel) 202.986.1038 (fax)

www.NARC.org

and job training programs, and job creation; revitalize downtown and historic neighborhoods that preserve a community's identity and historical character, while generating new jobs, supporting independent businesses, and creating new economic opportunity; increase access to cultural and entertainment attractions that foster community investment and expand tax and investment revenue; and, improve transportation options, access and choice that incentivize new business and residential development, and contribute to the overall economic growth of the region. Access to transportation options connects residents to jobs and investment to economic opportunity for regional and local businesses.

- **Transportation:** The Act would provide competitive granting opportunities that support sustainable transit-oriented investment. Transit options are important for regions of all sizes, providing residents transportation alternatives. By increasing sustainable multimodal transportation choices, communities can incentivize new business and residential development; provide residents greater access to jobs, education, and necessary resources; and, contribute to the overall economic growth of the region. The flexibility of the LCA allows regions to adapt to local transportation needs and plan around a variety of transportation options.
- **Environment/Agriculture:** The LCA would support projects that clean-up and redevelop brownfields, reinforce sustainable agricultural practices, preserve open space, rural areas and natural resources, and improve environmental quality and public health. The LCA would encourage local governments and regions to create regional food systems that offer new opportunities for commerce and growth for local and regional food producers, businesses and related industries, while supporting local jobs and food needs that connect urban, suburban and rural communities;



NARC

Building Regional Communities

National Association of Regional Councils

1666 Connecticut Avenue, NW Suite 300

Washington, DC 20009

202.986.1032 (tel) 202.986.1038 (fax)

www.NARC.org

improve environmental health and management by promoting sustainable practices that are guided by local government-approved, citizen-influenced comprehensive regional planning and implementation; and preserve agricultural land, natural resources, and open space as vital parts of rural areas and small towns for economic growth industries such as farming and tourism.

The LCA is also important from federal policy and programmatic perspectives in that it would:

- Not place mandates on local governments or regions, but would provide a competitive opportunity to engage in federal funding for comprehensive regional planning and implementation;
- Not have stringent requirements on local governments and regions, but would be inclusive and flexible; not be anti-growth, but would support prosperous, healthy communities that utilize sustainable land-use strategies through comprehensive regional planning and implementation for future transportation, housing, environmental, and economic development that looks at communities in a holistic fashion. The LCA encourages programs that make use of existing infrastructure and resources, as well as plan for future regional growth, changing demographics and needs; and,
- Not make exclusions, but would promote comprehensive, inclusive planning that is adaptable to local community needs.

The flexible, inclusive nature of the LCA is key to defining and seeing progress due to the fact that local governments and regions around the country are at varying stages of creating livable communities. By respect differing capabilities, geographies, demographics and cultures, the LCA is structured to allow for visionary plans and projects that will address local needs and desires. The mutually agreed upon decisions of the local governments and community stakeholders developed through the regional planning



NARC

Building Regional Communities

National Association of Regional Councils

1666 Connecticut Avenue, NW Suite 300

Washington, DC 20009

202.986.1032 (tel) 202.986.1038 (fax)

www.NARC.org

process, and provide choice in achieving common goals, while encouraging and incentivizing local planning, procurement and projects consistent with approved comprehensive regional plans. NARC views the LCA as a first step in patching together multiple federal, state, local and regional planning requirements and investment through incentives that promote holistic approaches to establishing livable communities. This includes the alignment of timetables, schedules, data and research, plan assumptions and forecasts, interagency consultation and outreach requirements, helping facilitate on-the-ground program linkages that exercise regional approaches to development.

Conclusion

More than ever, regional planning organizations – urban and rural alike – are the conduit by which local governments can save money and time, while achieving concrete and visionary results through the pooling resources and development of integrated solutions to some of our biggest challenges. Now is the time for the federal government bolster its commitment and assistance to regional efforts by encouraging multi-jurisdictional work through incentives, flexibility, streamlining and direct funding to our local governments and their regional planning organizations. The Livable Communities Act is vitally needed in communities and regions nationwide to help restore economic prosperity and foster partnerships and innovative practices that make all of our counties, cities, towns, townships, villages and boroughs great places to live, play, work and invest.

Thank you for allowing me to testify on behalf of NARC and giving me the opportunity to highlight some of the accomplishments and exemplary work of my region. NARC offers its support and assistance to ensure the Livable Communities Act is firmly incorporated into future Congressional work. We look forward to working with Chairman Dodd and the members of this Committee to progress federal enactment of



NARC

Building Regional Communities

National Association of Regional Councils

1666 Connecticut Avenue, NW Suite 300

Washington, DC 20009

202.986.1032 (tel) 202.986.1038 (fax)

www.NARC.org

policies, programs and funding that assist communities and regions in achieving their unique visions of livable communities through the cross-pollination of planning, program areas and services, linking community needs to smart, sustainable growth.