



Local governments working together for a better metropolitan region

March 10, 2010

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**Adjunct member*

Ms. Shelley Poticha

Director

Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities

U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development

451 7th Street, SW, Room 10180

Washington, DC 20410

Subject: Comments on Sustainable Communities Planning Grant Program - Docket No. FR-5396-N-01

Dear Ms. Poticha:

The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) is very excited and deeply grateful for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) recent announcement of the new Sustainable Communities Planning Grant Program. COG members applaud you and the Obama Administration for advancing groundbreaking sustainability initiatives linking the work of HUD, the U.S. Department of Transportation, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. HUD Deputy Secretary Ron Sims underscored HUD's goals in advancing this new grant program at the COG annual membership meeting in December 2009.

COG is the regional council for the National Capital Region. As the regional association of more than 250 local, state and federal elected officials representing 21 local governments, COG hosts and supports the National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board, our region's metropolitan planning organization (MPO) and the Metropolitan Washington Air Quality Committee, the tri-state air quality planning organization under the authority of the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990. COG also hosts a wide-range of inter-jurisdictional, multi-sector planning activities and groups that provide strong capacity to partner with HUD and other federal agencies.

The Sustainable Communities Grant Program provides an extraordinary opportunity for regional planning organizations to strengthen federal-regional partnerships to advance and implement our shared goals, thereby enhancing the sustainability, accessibility, prosperity, and livability of our communities. Through our ability to bring diverse communities together around a common vision that improves connectivity, access and quality of place, regional planning organizations are uniquely qualified to leverage federal assistance programs across issues and geographic areas.

COG's comments and responses to specific questions identified in the Advance Notice were guided by early input from an ad hoc community coalition representing the region's local governments, the business sector, philanthropic organizations, and civic and environmental advocacy groups. Our comments and responses were also reviewed and adopted by the COG Board of Directors at its March 10, 2010 meeting, underscoring COG's commitment to strengthen and advance long-held principles of sustainable development.

COG's Comments on the Advance Notice

To support HUD's interests, COG has organized its comments in accordance with the Advance Notice, thereby directly responding to HUD's overarching as well as specific questions.

Proposed Funding Categories and Eligible Activities

Category 1: Regional Plans for Sustainable Development

PLAN DESIGN: COG concurs with HUD's stated overall design for "Regional Plans for Sustainable Development" intended to yield harmonized plans and identify associated infrastructure in consideration of natural and man-made risks; a plan that includes locally-appropriate performance metrics; and includes broad input from the community and decision-makers.

ELIGIBLE ACTIVITIES: COG believes that a wide-range of activities should be eligible for supporting this effort, including but not limited to scenario planning; technical analysis including modeling and forecasting; regional mapping and related Geographic Information System (GIS) analysis; economic evaluation and multi-parameter cost and benefit assessments; and a robust public engagement program utilizing a wide range of techniques that will result in broad participation reflecting the diversity of community interests.

PARTICIPANTS IN THE PLANNING PROCESS: COG recommends that the planning process include all levels of government and affiliated governmental bodies such as water and wastewater utilities, transit agencies, and housing entities; community organizations and the business sector, as well as the general public.

PLAN ELEMENTS: Understanding that most land use, transportation and environmental actions are largely implemented at the local and state levels, we believe that elements of any plan must include a regional vision that reflects both the collective and individual visions of the region's local governments. Plans should include clear and measurable goals and specific timetables for implementation. The plan needs to address infrastructure needs and associated costs as well as an implementation and funding strategy.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PROCESS: Our experience indicates that numerous tools should be used to assure public engagement in the planning process including public polling, focus groups, town-hall style meetings, on-line electronic feedback methods including well designed web sites that include structured questions enabling public comment; use of social media techniques such as blogs, Facebook, and others. The opportunity for citizens to engage directly with elected officials in individual community meetings is also an essential component of any public participation effort for the regional plan.

ROLE OF SECTOR PLANS: Concerning whether or not regional plans should be "...expected to harmonize and be consistent with HUD, DOT and EPA-required plans...", COG suggests that regional plans for sustainable development be expected to take into consideration individual sector plans. The broader results of the Grant Program should lay a framework for meeting more specific requirements of sector plans.

NEED TO INCORPORATE ENERGY MANAGEMENT: Integral elements of a regional sustainability plan must include the critical role that energy management plays in community sustainability. COG recommends that energy conservation, as well as design and implementation of renewable energy projects and programs be specifically identified elements in the Sustainability Communities Planning Grants Program structure.

Category 2: Detailed Execution Plans and Programs

FUNDING PRIORITIES SHOULD REFLECT THE SIX LIVABILITY PRINCIPLES: Funding priority should be given to regions seeking to adopt and implement outcome based comprehensive regional sustainability plans that reflect the six “Livability Principles” recommended by the partner agencies. These regional comprehensive sustainability plans should encourage investment in existing communities, and also promote more transportation choices, economic competitiveness strategies, and affordable housing polices throughout a region.

APPROPRIATE USE OF CATEGORY 2 FUNDING: COG concurs with HUD’s recommendation that funds in Category 2 should be used to support the preparation and adoption of detailed plans and programs to implement an existing or nearly adopted integrated regional sustainable vision. Funding awards in this category should give priority to regional organizations whose projects will yield measureable outcomes linking growth, transportation and environmental stewardship. Resources should be particularly directed to those regions that are seeking to *implement* comprehensive regional sustainability plans, with performance-based targets, metrics and indicators for measuring progress.

FUNDING PRIORITY FOR CATEGORY 2: COG also suggests that funding priority in Category 2 Grant awards be given to regions in which consortia of local government and other stakeholders have a demonstrated record of working to develop comprehensive plans and shared solutions to shared problems.

LOCAL MATCH FLEXIBILITY NEEDED: Because local and state governments face tremendous budget challenges, COG believes the Grant program should be flexible with the proposed 20 percent local match requirements, with a wide range of in-kind services allowable as part of local match contribution.

EVIDENCE FOR MATCHING FUNDS: In framing the NOFA and reviewing subsequent grant applications, HUD should require applicants to list approved matching and/or additional funding sources, along with proof of such sources in the form of letters of intent and award letters, to complement the award they seek from the Sustainable Communities Initiative. The federal award should be viewed as a leveraging resource to further a regional applicant’s implementation efforts. COG also believes that competitive Program grants should be flexible and multi-year, and with emphasis on funding to regional planning organizations that may be at varying points within the adoption and implementation phase of a comprehensive regional planning process.

Category 3: Implementation Incentives

APPROPRIATE USES OF CATEGORY 3 FUNDING: Recipients of Category 3 funding should be able to use some of the funding to augment pre-development costs; capital costs for a regionally significant development projects or infrastructure investment, and land acquisition investments. COG strongly supports, through this Category, the ability of regions and local governments to leverage additional federal funds to catalyze existing or proposed projects much like “gap financing”, particularly as Category 3 projects are intended to be exceptionally innovative plans and projects.

Entities Eligible for Funding

REQUIRED PARTNERS: Regional councils and MPOs have many collective years of demonstrated success in implementing federal programs administered through each of the three Sustainable Communities partner federal agencies. There are few organizations that have in-place or could quickly assemble the coalitions of diverse stakeholder groups centered on local governments that organizations such as COG have built. COG strongly recommends that regional councils, councils of government and Metropolitan Planning Organizations, representing consortia of local governments and other stakeholders, be required as partners and, where capacity exists, be given clear preference as lead agencies for implementing the Sustainable Communities initiative.

DEMONSTRATED CAPACITY NEEDED FOR REGIONAL COUNCILS AND MPOs: Through a variety of programs, the federal government has invested considerable resources in regional councils and MPOs that should be focused and leveraged for the Sustainable Communities Planning Grant. COG and many of the forward looking regional councils and MPOs have also strengthened their community outreach and engagement, as well, expanding their coalitions beyond public officials and organizations. HUD must insist that regional councils and MPOs demonstrate a capacity to engage a broad range of stakeholders and the public in support of the Sustainable Communities Grant Program vision and goals.

Selection Criteria

FUNDING PRIORITY: While grateful that HUD has allocated \$100 million for this new planning initiative, COG recognizes that it is a fairly modest level of support for HUD's ambitious goals that must be applied to a nation of diverse regions. COG believes that funding priority must be given to regions that have demonstrated success in developing detailed regional sustainability visions and outcome based plans, as well as broad-based commitment and support to ensure successful implementation. COG and other regional councils possess the unique capacity to establish consortia of stakeholders that develop inclusive, high-performance, sustainable neighborhoods and regions.

Conclusion

COG applauds the three partner federal agencies in their ground-breaking commitment to a truly comprehensive regional planning process. COG, as the principal convener for the National Capital Region, stands ready to continue our partnership with the federal government and the Obama administration. We look forward to the final Notice of Funding Availability and the opportunity to submit our own competitive grant application.

Should you have any questions concerning our comments, or require further information, please contact David J. Robertson, COG's Executive Director, at 202-962-3260 or drobotson@mwkog.org.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'KRB' followed by a long horizontal flourish.

Kwame R. Brown
Chairman, Board of Directors
Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments