



**American Planning Association**

*Making Great Communities Happen*

TESTIMONY OF

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PLANNING DIRECTOR, CITY OF CHAMPAIGN, ILLINOIS  
PRESIDENT, AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION**

On behalf of

**THE AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION**

Before the

**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
COMMITTEE ON FINANCIAL SERVICES**

On

**THE LIVABLE COMMUNITIES ACT OF 2010**

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Good afternoon, Chairman Frank, Ranking Member Bachus and distinguished members of the committee. Thank you for holding this important hearing on the Livable Communities Act and inviting me to testify.

I am Bruce Knight, Planning Director for the City of Champaign, Illinois, and the President of the American Planning Association and a Fellow of APA's professional institute, the American Institute of Certified Planners. I am honored to appear before you today on behalf of APA and planners across the nation. Planners are hard at work in communities large and small at this critical moment laying the foundation for economic recovery and global competitiveness. I am especially pleased to be able to testify on behalf of legislation that offers vital new tools and resources for good planning, breaks down barriers to efficient infrastructure investment, and advances local quality of life. I want to especially thank Congressman Perlmutter for his leadership on this issue.

The American Planning Association represents more than 40,000 professional planners, planning commissioners, and engaged citizens interested in shaping the vision for the future of their communities and identifying pragmatic steps to create communities of lasting value. APA's members are involved, in the private sector and at all levels of government, in formulating and implementing plans that engage citizens in a thoughtful and careful process designed to create a blueprint for the future. These plans build communities that reflect the vision of local residents, promote wise stewardship of resources, increase choices for how we work, live and play, and enhance local quality of life.

In my role as president of APA, I have spent much of the last year and a half traveling to communities across the country. I have seen firsthand the serious economic challenges confronting so many towns and neighborhoods. From rising foreclosures and vacant

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Testimony of Bruce Knight, FAICP

property to lost employment centers and weakened tax bases at time of rising citizen need for services, places large and small are struggling to cope with tough problems.

All too often I have also seen serious cuts in planning in these same communities. This disinvestment comes at the worst possible moment. Good planning is absolutely essential to economic recovery and long-term prosperity. Good plans ensure that we are investing limited resources in smarter, more efficient ways that provide the foundation for stronger local economies that are more competitive and resilient. The places that are investing in good planning will be the places best positioned for growth. After all, the planning process provides a clear strategy to efficiently achieve the outcomes – good jobs, choices in where we live and how we travel, safe neighborhoods, affordable housing, a clean environment – which residents value and demand.

This is why the Livable Communities Act is so important. The legislation authorizes vital investment in the development and implementation of plans that lay the foundation for economic vitality. In my career, I have often seen the positive economic impact of good planning.

In my role as Planning Director for the City of Champaign I am fortunate to work for a City Manager and City Council that are investing in planning because they have seen the economic return it brings. Coming out of the 1980's Downtown Champaign was in a serious state of decline. In 1996 the City Council adopted the first Downtown Development Plan and since that time, and because of the programs established to implement the plan, Downtown Champaign has become a thriving center that once again (as it historically did) represents the heart of the community.

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Testimony of Bruce Knight, FAICP

on behalf of the American Planning Association

Page 2

I firmly believe that now is the time to invest in planning and that those communities that do, whether they are big or small, will recover from the great recession first. That is because they are the communities that will be prepared to reinvent themselves and take advantage of the new opportunities that will be presented. Many planners found that a major challenge with the Recovery Act was relative lack of support for planning combined with the need for “shovel ready” projects. That meant projects that were already designed, which means building more of the infrastructure of the past, versus building the greener, smarter infrastructure of the future. As the former president of the American Institute of Architects noted, shovel ready does not necessarily mean shovel worthy. APA’s Rebuilding America has documented the pending infrastructure crisis facing our country. While improved funding for infrastructure is part of the solution, changing development patterns to better utilize existing infrastructure is even more important. This is only likely to happen if policy makers are making decisions guided by smarter, greener Comprehensive Plans, leading to development regulations designed to promote greener, more sustainable development.

The City of Champaign is in the process of completing such a Comprehensive Plan, and has applied for a HUD Community Challenge Planning Grant to rewrite our development regulations to implement that plan.

The Livable Communities Act authorizes funding for comprehensive regional sustainability plans. This represents a significant new approach in federal policy related to planning. Unlike other federal planning policies that typically require a plan that is linked to a specific capital investment, such as HUD-mandated consolidated plans for Community Development Block Grant funds, plans under the Livable Communities Act are focused on the coordination and integration of planning across program, mode and agency boundaries. Further, these plans are based on incentives to encourage locally-driven

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Testimony of Bruce Knight, FAICP

on behalf of the American Planning Association

Page 3

innovation in planning, not a 'top-down' mandated process. The bill supports strong citizen engagement and participation in the planning process. The planning grants provide broad flexibility to allow regions and municipalities to match plans to local needs and context while the livability principles and standards that guide the plans ensure accountability and promote fresh approaches.

The planning envisioned in this legislation also supports this committee's work promoting greater energy and location efficiency in housing policy, and new strategies for considering the real cost of housing based its location and energy efficiency. Improving energy efficiency provides obvious benefits to both residents and the community. It is easy to focus on individual buildings in the effort to 'green' neighborhoods, but it is critical that larger issues of job access, travel options, and housing choice also be considered. This committee took bold, bipartisan action earlier this year in approving the GREEN Act. The Livable Communities Act takes many of those same core concerns to a broader scale and helps coordinate plans, codes, and capital investments to support both energy efficiency savings and long-term economic, social and environmental benefits.

There is simply no other federal support for this kind of planning. And, it is already clear that the demand is great among communities. As you know, Congress appropriated funding in this fiscal year for an initial round of sustainability grants. Reports from APA members around the country suggest that, much like DOT's TIGER grant program, demand will far exceed supply.

A small investment in good planning can pay big dividends in efficiency, reduced infrastructure costs, leveraged private investment, and enhanced competitiveness. And, the anticipated investment is indeed modest. Planning funds represent just a tiny fraction

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Testimony of Bruce Knight, FAICP

on behalf of the American Planning Association

Page 4

of federal resources for capital investments. Yet, it is plans that will ensure that federal capital investments make a positive economic and social impact. The planning process outlined in the Livable Community Act will help communities understand the true costs and benefits from various investments and growth patterns leading to better decision-making and stewardship of public resources.

In my view, the economic benefits of this legislation clearly outweigh the short-run costs. I share concerns about fiscal responsibility, but good planning is the best way to ensure good investment and careful management of taxpayer dollars. This legislation creates jobs, eliminates waste, and promotes greater government efficiency while also allowing people to craft a vision for new development and growth based on local values and opportunities to build a more sustainable, livable future.

A core element of the Livable Communities Act is the focus on integrating plans and programs and providing a platform for both regional and interagency coordination. APA applauds the efforts of HUD, DOT and EPA in forming an interagency partnership on sustainable communities. This important collaboration is long overdue. These three agencies administer the main federal programs providing assistance for critical infrastructure investment. Yet, each maintains separate and sometimes conflicting or overlapping planning requirements.

It has been all too common to see federal investments that lack coordination with local planning efforts result in disconnects that waste resources and burden communities. The lack of coordination of affordable housing, transportation options, and employment centers has led in many places to traffic congestion and rising household costs that fall disproportionately on lower income families. Part of the cause lies with the lack of

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Testimony of Bruce Knight, FAICP

on behalf of the American Planning Association

Page 5

coordination in planning for federal transportation, housing, economic development and environmental protection programs.

Administratively, HUD, DOT and EPA have already taken steps to promote closer integration. For example, regulatory barriers that long prevented communities from connecting federal transportation funding with CDBG funding have been addressed. Additionally, the agencies have linked the grant application process for TIGER 2 planning grants with HUD community challenge grants.

Passage of the Livable Communities Act would take this integration further by establishing a common regional planning process that is comprehensive in scope and explicitly aims to connect a variety of federal capital investments.

The current efforts of HUD, DOT and EPA are a significant advance in the effort to break down federal program “silos.” Passage of the Livable Communities Act would ensure that these efforts are not a momentary occurrence by establishing in statute both an office of sustainable communities at the Department of Housing and Urban Development responsible for coordinating planning and implementation efforts with partner agencies and an expanded federal council that brings together departments and programs through the federal government that have an impact on community planning and sustainable development.

As important and valuable as cooperation has already been among HUD, DOT and EPA, other agencies and departments should also be part of the effort, particularly those that provide significant federal resources for infrastructure and development, such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Economic Development Administration.

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Testimony of Bruce Knight, FAICP

on behalf of the American Planning Association

Page 6

The legislation also creates an important new approach encouraging regional cooperation. True regionalism is notoriously difficult to achieve. Our system of multiple, sometimes overlapping local units of government makes regional collaboration hard. The reality is that regionalism, including regional planning, exists in a sort of constitutional twilight among federal, state and local governments. That said, many of our most important challenges are regional in nature. This is especially true when it comes to addressing the problems of housing affordability, transportation options, community development, watershed protection, and environmental quality.

The current round of sustainability grants has already encouraged many communities to pursue greater integration and coordination. For example, Greensboro, North Carolina, opted to incorporate the six federal livability principles into their newly updated HUD consolidated plan. This effort led to a cooperative effort among local and regional organizations to draft a proposal for the federal sustainability planning grant that explicitly linked planned investments in transportation, affordable housing and community redevelopment in targeted neighborhoods. Using the data collected as part of this process, the city was also able to identify several key trends related to economic growth and development patterns that will continue to shape local and regional decision-making.

Greensboro is not alone. APA has heard from many communities and regions that the effort to apply for the first round of sustainability planning grants has itself provided tangible benefits. These collaborations and benefits would only be deepened by further establishing and refining these programs through the Livable Communities Act.

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Testimony of Bruce Knight, FAICP

on behalf of the American Planning Association

Page 7

Regional comprehensive plans under the Livable Communities Act would create a new cooperative framework for regional cooperation by bringing together not only municipalities in the region but also a wide array of other key stakeholders from the private and non-profit sectors. The plans that emerge from this process could support the federal livability principles, guide new infrastructure investment while also informing local comprehensive plans and development codes that are so vital to true coordination and effectiveness.

To achieve the outcomes that citizens envisioned in the planning process, plans must be implemented. This implementation process involves an array of activities including site planning, development ordinances, zoning changes, multi-year capital programs, and policy incentives. The legislation also provides critical support for these activities.

Communities can choose to apply for support to move plans to implementation, to the outcomes that residents want and need. In my own city, we are seeking initial funding to support a new “green code” that will help implement key sustainability components of the comprehensive plan.

Among the biggest benefits of the Livable Communities Act is that it resists the usual temptation to establish yet another layer of federal plans and program requirements. Instead, the focus on integration and coordination support the comprehensive plan. APA believes that the comprehensive viewpoint of planning is among its greatest assets. And, the comprehensive plan is the appropriate place to bring together capital investment decisions and citizen’s vision for the future of the community.

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Testimony of Bruce Knight, FAICP

on behalf of the American Planning Association

Page 8

APA has initiated a new Sustaining Places Initiative to help give direction and guidance to policymakers and planners on how best to incorporate sustainability principles into the comprehensive planning process. The federal emphasis on sustainability and livability is a welcome and important step forward. This APA initiative will identify the best practices communities can use to make the comprehensive plan the platform for achieving sustainability goals and develop the practices to create the next generation of such plans.

The Livable Community Act acknowledges the importance of the critical role of the comprehensive plan and development of tools for plan implementation. When the Senate Banking Committee considered and approved its version of the Livable Communities Act in early August, provisions supporting local code development, reform and enforcement were adopted. APA supported these changes. Strengthening local plans and codes are a vital part of ensuring that federally-supported plans are implemented.

Many places struggle with outdated codes or lack of consistency between adopted plans and development decisions. This legislation can make a valuable contribution by providing resources and incentives for improving local codes, linking implementation tools to sustainability plans, and providing needed investment in plans, implementation and capital projects. I would note that a major strength of the legislation is its recognition that planning and plan implementation activities warrant support and guidance separate from resources devoted to capital projects. Both are important, but separate and distinct support for planning is critical.

APA strongly supports the provisions of the legislation that set aside resources specifically for rural communities and smaller regions. Good planning is particularly vital to the success, competitiveness and quality of life in these areas. Yet, these regions often

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Testimony of Bruce Knight, FAICP

on behalf of the American Planning Association

Page 9

struggle with finding sufficient resources and technical capacity. Sustainability planning is not just for one region of the country or major metropolitan centers.

Much of this committee's attention throughout the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress has been focused on the housing and foreclosure crisis. This legislation provides another opportunity to help people and places especially hard hit by the recession. Planning is among the most useful tools for communities suffering from high rates of foreclosure, property vacancy and abandonment. The planning and community challenge grants under the legislation provide desperately needed tools and resources to help cities, towns and regions deal with the crisis. Additionally, communities can use grants to implement tools, such as land banks, to address vacant property issues while also implementing new economic development and transportation strategies.

The Senate Banking Committee adopted provisions to establish a separate planning program for communities dealing with acute population loss or property abandonment. APA supports the inclusion of this pilot program. We believe it is most important to allow both vacant property and high foreclosure community planning eligibilities under the planning grant title of the Livable Communities Act and establish a separate program for these activities within the legislation.

While APA strongly supports the legislation, there are opportunities to further improve the bill. Among the biggest challenges is the need to further support local technical assistance and capacity building. Too many communities lack the resources to compete for or implement the resources provided by the Livable Communities Act. The bill does acknowledge this issue and provide support. However, more will be needed. APA suggests providing dedicated resources for both technical support to communities and regions that

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Testimony of Bruce Knight, FAICP

on behalf of the American Planning Association

Page 10

receive planning grants (especially those struggling with significant economic challenges) and core planning capacity building. Some changes can be made to strengthen the Livable Communities Act but other programs may need to be used or targeted to provide adequate support.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the American Planning Association and to discuss some of the innovations and approaches under way in Champaign. I want to commend Representative Perlmutter, Chairman Frank, and the members of this committee for working from the outset to solicit input from communities, planners and local governments in the development of this legislation. I encourage you to move forward with this legislation and continue supporting the vital work of good planning in building communities of lasting value.