METROPOLITAN KANSAS CITY: CREATING SUSTAINABLE PLACES

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G. Thomas Kingsley
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INTRODUCTION

This case study is one of a series on work done by local partners in the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP) in support of federal place-based initiatives.\(^1\) It describes how the Mid-America Regional Council (MARC—Kansas City’s metropolitan planning organization) used a grant from the Obama administration’s Partnership for Sustainable Communities initiative to improve the effectiveness of its region’s development process.\(^2\) No one would have expected this work to totally transform the region’s sprawl-oriented development system, but it made inroads that few might have thought possible even five years ago.

NNIP is a national network of local organizations whose mission is to advance the use of neighborhood-level data in decisionmaking to strengthen local governance. All NNIP partners build and operate information systems with data from many sources on changing neighborhood conditions in their cities. They also commit to facilitating the use of data in practical ways to support policymaking and community building. MARC is one of two entities that serve together as the Kansas City members of NNIP; indeed, the neighborhood-level data MARC has assembled and the way the data were used were key to what MARC was able to accomplish.\(^3\)

We begin by describing the problems inherent in metropolitan development at the start of this century and Partnership for Sustainable Communities, the initiative that the Obama administration established to try to address those problems. We then explain the strategy MARC and its local partners in metropolitan Kansas City devised for using the grant it received under this effort. This explanation is followed by a description of how the work was carried out. The final sections discuss results and implications.

\(^{1}\)NNIP is explained further in Kingsley, Coulton, and Pettit (2014). NNIP has local partners in more than 30 cities and is coordinated by the Urban Institute.

\(^{2}\)For other examples of NNIP partner activities related to Partnership for Sustainable Communities, visit the NNIP website at http://www.neighborhoodindicators.org/issue-area/209.

\(^{3}\)The other organization that represents Kansas City in NNIP is the Center for Economic Information at the University of Missouri–Kansas City.
SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES: THE CONTEXT

The motivating context for the Obama administration’s program was the remarkably inefficient process by which land has been developed in almost all US metropolitan areas over most of the last half of the 20th century:

• Low-income groups (mostly minorities) grew rapidly as a share of the populations of most large US cities. Market conditions, discriminatory real estate practices and misguided government policies led to concentrations of low-income groups in particular neighborhoods. These forces and public and private disinvestment created distressed neighborhoods with high crime rates, deteriorating housing, and a host of related problems.

• The response was “white flight”—whites moving to the suburbs to isolate themselves from these problems. To prevent the spread of these problems, suburbanites relied on low-density zoning—zoning that prohibited the higher-density housing that low-income groups might be able to afford. An unavoidable consequence, of course, was suburban sprawl.

• The motivations behind this approach were powerful. The fear that the values of their own homes would decline if city problems spread led to support for this sprawl-oriented process, even from many suburbanites who might otherwise have accepted living in a more racially and economically integrated environment.

• Support for the process was reinforced by land developers, who had learned how to profit considerably from developing land on the fringe at low densities.

The effects were dramatic. Fulton et al. (2001) showed that from 1982 through 1997, the populations of US metropolitan areas rose by 17.0 percent while the amount of developed land in them increased by 47.1 percent. In other words, our metros had developed almost three times as much land as they needed just to remain at the same (and still quite low) overall density that had been reached 15 years before. And nothing suggests any basic change since then.

Laidley (forthcoming) developed a new index that registered continued increases in sprawl from 2000 through 2010 in almost all of the largest metro areas of the United States.

4 The research covered the 281 metropolitan areas defined at that time. On average, their urban density had dropped by 20.5 percent from 1982 to 1997. And the trend was pervasive: 94 percent of metro areas registered declines in density over this 15-year period.
Developing much more land than is needed substantially raises the cost of all development. It implies the need for more expansive (and thus costly) water supply, sewerage, road, and other infrastructure networks, and it also implies that everyone has to travel more because trip destinations are farther apart.

Most people seem to understand that sprawl has deleterious environmental impacts—for example, more encroachment on farmlands and other open space and more air pollution because of more vehicle miles traveled and less open space. But the barriers that sprawl creates to achieving other key goals are not always so widely recognized.

First, artificially high development costs make it impossible to provide decent housing in accessible locations that is affordable to low-income groups and thus to forcefully address segregation and related social goals. To be sure, other actions are needed to reach those goals (e.g., enforcement of fair housing laws, mobility programs), but those steps are not going to work on their own if housing costs remain markedly inflated. Second, excessive development costs make a region less competitive economically, thereby diminishing private investment in job creation.

Nonetheless, some conditions in the suburbs have been changing in ways that might motivate different ways of doing things. First, the suburbs have already become racially and economically more diverse. By 2000, only 26 percent of all suburban census tracts still had populations that were more than 90 percent white.

Furthermore, between 2000 and 2011, the number of poor people in the suburbs grew more than twice as fast as in the central cities (64 percent versus 29 percent). The poverty rate in 2011 was still higher in the cities (22 percent) than the suburbs (12 percent), but by then more than half the metropolitan poor (55 percent) lived in the suburbs (Berube and Holmes 2013). This change did not happen the way most might have hoped. The suburban poor are spatially concentrated, mostly in older suburbs, and generally have to pay extremely high shares of their incomes for housing and transportation. Nonetheless, the image that suburbs are solidly white and affluent is no longer valid.

Second, forecasts of future demographics for our metro areas anticipate the fastest growth for minorities and types of households that often prefer “urban” (higher-density) living environments (e.g., the elderly, young singles, and childless couples). Those forecasts suggest the likelihood of some shift in growth back toward the central cities, but they also imply demand for at least pockets of higher density in the suburbs.
These changes by no means suggest the imminent collapse of the traditional sprawl-oriented growth system, but as suggested earlier, they may indicate an opening for alternatives. Suburban homeowners, who used to think that incursion by the poor from the city was the main threat to their property values, might now begin to worry about declining demand for single-family tract housing that is far from activity centers.
Soon after it came into office, the Obama administration recognized the importance of regional development issues and saw support for more effective local planning as key to addressing them. But the administration also recognized ways in which federal actions had been part of the problem historically. Key federal agencies working on metropolitan development generally did not coordinate well with each other; they often operated in ways that created programmatic “silos,” thus making it harder for local agencies to coordinate their work across fields. Accordingly, as the first step (in June 2009), the secretary of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the secretary of the US Department of Transportation (DOT), and the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency established a joint “Partnership for Sustainable Communities” (Pendall et al. 2013).

Their primary goal was to break down the barriers that had inhibited coordination at all levels. They announced that they would be guided by six integrative “livability principles”: (1) provide more transportation choices; (2) promote equitable, affordable housing; (3) enhance economic competitiveness; (4) support existing communities; (5) coordinate policies and leverage investment; and (6) value communities and neighborhoods (HUD 2012; Marsh 2014).

HUD established a Sustainable Communities Regional Planning grant program that would ultimately award more than $165 million to 74 regional grantees from 2010 through 2014. HUD sought proposals from local consortia for planning processes that would engage stakeholders and residents in meaningful decisionmaking roles. Broader collaboration and coordination was a central theme, just as it had been initially at the federal level.

Part of the HUD application (accounting for 22 of 102 rating points) required applicants to show their capacity to use data to set and monitor progress toward performance goals (HUD 2010). The program specified a common set of performance measures called flagship sustainable indicators (HUD 2012). It also provided technical assistance to increase the capacity of grantees to use mapping and analysis to guide and track the implementation of their plans.
MARC AND THE STRATEGY FOR METROPOLITAN KANSAS CITY

MARC is a nonprofit association of city and county governments in the two-state Kansas City region and serves as the region’s metropolitan planning organization. The association is governed by a board of directors composed of elected local officials from the 9 counties and 119 cities that make up the region.

MARC has served the area for more than 40 years and works collaboratively with all of its jurisdictions. In the 2000s, the faults of the region’s traditional development process had become more apparent. After considerable consultation and joint work with its partners, MARC captured the main ideas in a shared regional vision statement in 2009. Key regional sustainability principles were put forward in three areas—economy, society, and environment. Evidence was presented, consistent with the conclusions of the context review in this paper, to show how the excessive costs of the traditional development process were undermining aspirations in all three of those areas. Also consistent with our context review was explicit recognition that important demographic shifts were under way in metropolitan Kansas City that might create opportunities for higher-density development.

This work had also yielded bold but untested ideas about how change might be brought about. Winning one of HUD’s new planning grants might give the region the resources it needed to flesh out and implement those ideas. The region (not just MARC, but MARC as a part of a consortium with more than 60 local partners) submitted an application to HUD. In October 2010, the consortium was awarded a $4.25 million grant to implement its new program: Creating Sustainable Places (CSP).

CONCENTRATING GROWTH IN PROMISING ACTIVITY CENTERS AND TRANSPORTATION CORRIDORS

The population of metropolitan Kansas City is expected to grow from its present 2.0 million to around 2.7 million over the next 30 years. Given the context as we have described, the strategy needed to provide for as much of this growth as possible through redevelopment and infill; i.e., so as to raise the densities of currently developed areas rather than develop more new land on the metropolitan fringe.
To make that happen, the planners would first identify and then focus growth in several highly accessible activity centers and transportation corridors—places in the region where redevelopment and increasing densities would be most economically viable. Unlike approaches of the past, this strategy would proactively promote change in those areas; it would not just wait for private developers to discover the prospective advantages of this approach on their own.

Why had comparatively little of this type of infill and adaptive reuse been implemented in the past? There are good reasons to believe that few developers (private or public) had yet understood the investment returns that could be gained from this approach given emerging patterns of demand. Furthermore, planning this sort of redevelopment is much more complicated and costly for an investor than is planning new construction on open land.

The strategy was designed to address those barriers. First, identifying and focusing the work in attractive centers and corridors would highlight promising real investment opportunities in a concrete way. Preparing “demonstration corridor” plans was likely to be more compelling than making the case for higher densities in the abstract. Second, locations would be selected where local officials and other stakeholders were already interested in exploring change along these lines and the work would be done in a way that would energize and support their decisionmaking. Solutions would not be handed down from outside. Third, MARC and consultants would provide technical assistance and training for projects in the selected areas, and a major effort would be made to provide data and automated tools that would enable investors to substantially reduce cost and uncertainty in project planning.

**SUPPORTING THEMES**

Three other themes worked to make CSP a more serious vehicle for real change than previous efforts in the region. The underlying principles are consistent with MARC’s longstanding approach and with principles always advocated by NNIP.

**Broader collaboration.** The HUD grant required the application to be put forward by a consortium (rather than just MARC). MARC’s long-term connections with the region’s actors facilitated building this action coalition. Through the work of the consortium’s coordinating committee, more time would be spent engaging a broader range of local leaders and other stakeholders than had been typically involved in regional planning efforts before. The objective was not only to inform but also to offer meaningful participation in decisionmaking, thereby creating a sense of real ownership among participants.
**Broader communication and education.** The consortium promised a more forceful effort to communicate with and engage all segments of the public on both the need and the opportunity for change. This effort started just a few months after the grant was awarded with the publication of a highly accessible report explaining the new program and the reasoning behind it (MARC 2011). This publication was followed by many presentations to a diverse array of groups throughout the region and by an aggressive media strategy. The latter would include partnering with the local public television station to produce a series of 12 half-hour programs on aspects of sustainable development under CSP.

The initial report made a clear argument about why new conditions demanded a new way of doing things (MARC 2011). It provided the data showing notable demographic changes in metropolitan Kansas City similar to those we noted earlier: more elderly households, a changing family structure (people marrying later and having fewer children), and a rapidly rising minority share of population growth even in the suburbs. It also documented how costs were rising for transportation and other infrastructure, estimating that continuing to build outward could “cost the region $1 billion more per year for construction and maintenance than more compact development” (MARC 2011, 2).

**Stronger focus on social equity and fair housing.** NNIP partners all agree to place a particular focus on work that improves the opportunities for those living in low-income neighborhoods. The CSP plan demonstrates this commitment through the establishment of a new equity network to “encourage planning and policies using an equity lens to evaluate how development and redevelopment can help disadvantaged populations, connect them to economic opportunity, improve their access to good housing and provide them with quality educational opportunities” (MARC 2013a, 7). MARC also pledged to conduct a fair housing equity assessment (regionwide, not just in the selected corridors) and to use the results of that assessment to prepare a first-time-ever housing element for Greater Kansas City’s regional plan.
In this section, we discuss how the CSP strategy was actually implemented.

SELECTING DEMONSTRATION CORRIDORS

Selecting viable corridors for investment was the essential first step in MARC’s CSP strategy. This task had actually been completed under an earlier transportation planning program before the HUD grant was awarded. The work was primarily analytic. Over the previous decade, following the NNIP model, MARC had assembled (and has since regularly updated) a large database with many indicators for small areas throughout the region (mostly at the block group level, but with some indicators for individual land parcels). This database includes a considerable data from the US Census (e.g., population by age, race, and poverty level), but it also includes a host of locally derived information on physical features (e.g., street network, public facilities); real estate market conditions (land values, property sales); indicators from agency records (crime rates, births and deaths, health insurance, businesses and employment, school characteristics); and transit accessibility and other travel and transportation measures.

The task was to identify accessible subareas in the region that would be most attractive for higher-density and mixed-use development (i.e., areas that could now be considered underutilized in relation to their intermediate-term market potential). To support the assessment, MARC staff members mapped a sizable number of relevant indicators, some directly from the database and others constructed from two or more database variables (e.g., indexes of neighborhood walkability, intersection density or connectivity, job–worker balance). An area’s comparative access to job opportunities emphasized. MARC staff members presented the data to and discussed implications with many local groups.

Areas that appeared to be good candidates for demonstration corridors were rated mainly on the basis of data analysis. However, the teams also took into account their knowledge of the development interests and capacities of relevant stakeholders living and working in each area (individuals and institutions—public, private, and nonprofit). These stakeholders were the groups staff members met with most often in the final phases of the selection process.

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5Most of this database, called Metro Dataline, is now made available to the public in accessible formats on the MARC website. Much of it can be downloaded at no cost.
6See the discussion in Fregonese (2013).
At the end of this process, six areas had been selected as Corridor Demonstration Projects (exhibit 1). Planning and implementation were to be focused in these areas in the short term, with the view that lessons learned there would be applied in other corridors and places later. Participants generally felt that the analytic work was key to gaining timely and broad support for the selections (making it evident that the choices were made primarily on the basis of facts rather than for political reasons).

Exhibit 1
PROJECT PLANNING INSIDE THE DEMONSTRATION CORRIDORS: BASIC PROCESS

Since the selections had already been made, MARC staff members were able to begin working with local officials and other stakeholders in the selected corridors immediately after the grant was awarded. They started by negotiating work programs and arranging for the provision of technical assistance and consultant services in each corridor. The planning teams examined possibilities for a variety of projects, but of greatest interest to us here was how they made decisions about redevelopment (a feature of the work in most corridors).

In approaching redevelopment, the planning teams first analyzed conditions throughout the corridor to identify specific locations for investment likely to have the highest payoffs. Where could one undertake redevelopment projects—normally multiparcel, mixed-use projects with significant increases in density—that not only would be economically attractive but would also have a high probability of catalyzing waves of new investment in the surrounding blocks and neighborhoods? Most often these nodes turned out to be areas around transit stops and other high-access street intersections.

As noted earlier, planning for this sort of redevelopment is costly and complicated. Doing it well requires (1) scanning characteristics of hundreds of candidate land parcels in each corridor; (2) conceptualizing alternative redevelopment scenarios for a number of them; and (3) explicitly estimating and comparing probable outcome metrics implied by the different scenarios (e.g., development costs, rental income generated, return on investment, travel generated, parking required, energy and water needed, etc.). Systematic application of this approach (with full quantification) is costly with traditional methods. Doing so became feasible in the planning work for the Kansas City corridors, however, because (1) MARC had already assembled much of the data required and (2) new software tools were available or under development that would automate most of the work in scenario building and testing—most important a suite of software applications called Envision Tomorrow.\(^7\)

The first stages of the work entailed conducting a fresh market analysis for each corridor (supplementing information in MARC’s database as needed) and then scanning information on the land in the corridor to identify candidate redevelopment sites for further testing. This task was

\(^7\) Envision Tomorrow is an open source tool for testing alternative site development scenarios, used by regional planning agencies as well as urban designers and developers. Other generally similar tools for this purpose, such as Urban Footprint and Community Viz, have been developed in recent years. Holway et al (2012), provides useful review of these tools and others being used to assess planning scenarios at larger scales (neighborhood, citywide, regional).
in part computer assisted (e.g., using a redevelopment readiness analysis application that examines land value trends and other data for individual land parcels) but still relied most heavily on the market knowledge of members of the planning team.

When candidate sites were identified, alternative redevelopment scenarios were then formulated for each. MARC has assembled a library of building prototypes—that is, data on costs and other characteristics for different building types (e.g., medium-density single-family housing, medium-density offices). The planner specifies a building type for a particular land parcel, enters specific information about the parcel along with a few other relevant assumptions, and then applies the prototype builder component of Envision Tomorrow. The software then estimates the expected return on investment and other outcome metrics for the building.

This approach is then applied more broadly to all (or most) of the other parcels in the development node being tested, specifying a mix of land uses, building types, and so forth that together form a redevelopment scenario for the node as a whole. Envision Tomorrow then calculates the estimated outcome metrics for the scenario overall. The planners critically examine the results for this scenario A, and after they conceptualize and enter variations they think might work better (e.g., change the land uses or building types for particular parcels), Envision Tomorrow calculates all the metrics for this new scenario B so that the planners can assess the differences. The tool can rapidly answer questions such as “What would happen to overall return on investment and traffic generation if we switched Parcel No. 6 to three-story buildings with ground-floor retail and apartments above, 10 percent of them subsidized enough to be affordable to families with incomes below 50 percent of median?” Envision Tomorrow is also equipped with advanced visualization capacities that enable it to produce highly realistic depictions of what particular areas in the development would look like once built.

**PLANNING FOR REDEVELOPMENT INSIDE THE DEMONSTRATION CORRIDORS: OVERALL APPLICATION**

After the planning team in a corridor designed and tested an initial set of redevelopment scenarios, the results were reviewed with a broader range of corridor residents and other stakeholders. Most of these sessions were highly interactive, with the new participants asking pointed questions and suggesting even more ideas to be tested. This interaction enabled participants to play a more meaningful role in planning decisions than most had ever played before. Along with this benefit, the overall approach (particularly its tough-minded estimates of
Exhibit 2: Armour Boulevard and Troost Final Plan

Source: Collins Notes & Associates, LC and Taliaferro & Browne, Inc
the effects of alternatives) gave the process substantial credibility in later sessions with larger audiences and with the media.

Most important, the analysis showed that redevelopment in these corridors could be economically feasible. Most of the plans involved some public support (e.g., contribution of a land parcel, subsidies for some low-income units), but all were to be developed predominantly with private financing, and the analysis indicated attractive returns on investment were possible.

The teams in all six corridors completed a full planning process (including the publication of a report) before the HUD grant period came to a close in late 2013. The mix of recommended projects differed across corridors and included transportation improvements and other types of investments, as well as node redevelopment.

8 See http://www.marc.org/Regional-Planning/Creating-Sustainable-Places/CSP-Background/Corridor-Demonstration-Projects for the reports.
The Troost Avenue Corridor report documents good examples of the redevelopment approach (see exhibits 2 and 3). After the overall analysis, the team selected two nodes for redevelopment: around the intersections of (1) Armour Boulevard and Troost Avenue and (2) 63rd Street and Troost Avenue. The Armour and Troost plan (CN+TB 2013, 44–45) explains:

Pedestrian oriented in scale, the ultimate plan … reintroduces some neighborhood retail and small-scale mixed-use buildings with workforce-oriented apartments similar in scale to Kansas City’s historic colonnaded apartment buildings…. This plan is designed to enhance and strengthen the ongoing surrounding neighborhood revitalization efforts, but retains a higher density along Troost in keeping with the market analysis trends and feasibility…. [The plan entails] an organic mix of gradual improvements, removal of blighting influences, stimulus projects and private investment.

SUSTAINABLE CODES FRAMEWORK: MARC’S SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT NAVIGATOR

Many of the current codes of the region’s local governments (regulations governing land subdivision, zoning, and site and building design) are not only badly out of date but also are inconsistent with the sustainability principles of MARC’s new strategy. The issue was highlighted in the corridor planning process (teams recognized some code changes would be required to implement their new redevelopment plans) and also was raised by the First Suburbs Coalition, a group of municipalities in the inner suburbs, which saw that aspects of the present codes were hampering attractive development opportunities.

MARC responded by developing a web-based tool kit (a collection of guidance and best-practice examples drawn from nationwide experience) that users could access if they wanted to modify or replace their current codes. MARC provided technical assistance to the municipal staff for using these tools as well. Its website also contains full descriptions of the sustainability principles and the reasoning behind them. (Actually, the sustainable development navigator was funded by a separate $403,000 HUD Community Planning Challenge Grant, which was closely aligned with the HUD CSP planning grant). The MARC staff has also used the tools to prepare code audits for eight localities in the First Suburbs Coalition that requested this help. In these audits, MARC staff members review the local government’s current codes in relation to CSP principles and draft a set of actions the locality could take to make its codes more supportive of sustainable development.
THE KANSAS CITY EQUITY NETWORK AND THE FAIR HOUSING AGENDA

The promised equity network was established. Its most important activity during the grant period was to work closely with outside consultants to prepare an assessment of the region’s social equity strengths and challenges (PolicyLink and the University of Southern California Program for Environmental and Regional Equity 2013). The equity network had not adopted a clear agenda for action by the end of the CSP period, but it is “a broad coalition that will continue to address social equity questions and raise the profile of equity as a key consideration in planning” (MARC 2013b, 9).

MARC also followed through on its commitments on the housing front. The prominence of the planning activities in the corridors in 2011 and 2012 and the efforts to weave increments of affordable housing into the plans stimulated additional interest in broader aspects of housing affordability (needs and barriers). Most work in this area took place in 2013. The Fair Housing Equity Assessment (FHEA) entailed analysis of data on all neighborhoods regionwide to understand the nature and extent of concentrated poverty (MARC 2014a). Many neighborhoods were classified as Racially Concentrated Areas of Poverty (RCAPs) and others as Opportunity Areas, and differences in characteristics and spatial patterns were examined in the search for methods to reduce concentration. This work was facilitated by a considerable amount of small-area data provided by HUD, but other data from MARC’s own database were also essential—again, a task that would not have been feasible if MARC had not already developed its regionwide database with neighborhood-level data. Analyses were also conducted of fair housing complaints, mortgage denial rates, and the strength and capacity of the local institutional infrastructure available to address those issues.

The new housing element for the regional plan (MARC 2014b) pulled over key findings and conclusions from the FHEA and added: a broader framework of regional housing challenges, needs, barriers, and opportunities; the results of a new analysis of housing affordability (done by subarea); and a structured list of action recommendations.9 MARC staff believe that the broad education that resulted from their earlier planning work in the corridors (particularly, their demonstration of the market feasibility of higher density housing in suburban locations) led to a considerably more positive reception for their work on the FHEA than it otherwise would have received.

9The housing element also referenced and expanded on findings and conclusions from BBC Research and Consulting (2011), a regional analysis that had been prepared earlier for the region’s nine Community Development Block Grant Entitlement Communities.
CONTINUING CSP MOMENTUM

As noted, MARC’s CSP grant ended in late 2013, and it is much too early to be able to assess results reliably. However, at this point (mid-2015), there is strong evidence of continued momentum and of some possibly fundamental shifts in the development process.

First, proactive implementation of CSP themes still appears to dominate MARC’s overall agenda. In an unprecedented move, the MARC board recently created a permanent Sustainable Places Policy Committee to continue overseeing this work. MARC’s most concrete step was creating its new Planning Sustainable Places (PSP) program even before CSP was complete. This ongoing program mobilizes a pool of funds that can be allocated competitively for the implementation of CSP projects (some as called for in corridor plans along with others that embody CSP principles). The first round of PSP merged HUD funding and DOT resources and made 18 grants, which totaled $1.58 million. PSP has since had two more rounds, all with DOT funding. Focusing these DOT resources on CSP implementation is regarded as an important reorientation of priorities locally.

Stakeholders in all corridors (not just MARC staff) are continuing to work toward the implementation of these plans, albeit some more forcefully than others. Redevelopment is still challenging, and all plans may not be brought to fruition, but there are clear indications of serious progress in that direction. For example, in addition to the projects funded under PSP, other CSP plan corridor projects have been initiated with financing arranged by local governments, and private investment is also beginning to flow. One of the strongest markers of intent has been by Kansas City, Missouri. Recognizing that its planned redevelopment in the Troost Corridor was not compatible with its zoning ordinance, the city has already approved zoning amendments that will allow that work to move forward.

In addition, members of the First Suburbs Coalition (with ongoing MARC assistance) continue to work toward code improvements. These efforts have already served as the basis for a new “complete streets” policy in one municipality, a comprehensive plan update in another, and strategies to accommodate more housing for older adults in a third. Also noteworthy is that MARC secured a DOT TIGER (Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery) planning grant devoted to finding ways to improve transit connections between areas of concentrated poverty and areas of jobs and opportunity. The equity network continues to meet regularly and has decided to focus its own agenda on this theme.
But what about broader influence in the real estate market? Although such influence is difficult to measure, there are indications that CSP made important strides in this area as well. CSP supported factual analyses showing how higher-density, mixed-use redevelopment (even with some affordable apartments) could yield attractive returns on investment in the corridors, and those results were well publicized. In fact, a sizable number of civic leaders and potential investors who participated in the work directly internalized those findings, and their word of mouth commanded serious attention in influential circles.

Before 2010, it would have been hard to find any mention of such possibilities in the general or professional media. Now such mentions are plentiful. Over the past year, multifamily structures have dominated building permit activity, and some very large new investments have been announced. A striking example is the plan to redevelop the vacated Metcalf South mall property into a mixed-use development with housing at fairly high densities, considering its location in the southern Kansas suburbs.¹⁰

To be sure, acceptance of these new market realities would probably have emerged on its own eventually. However, MARC believes its work under CSP accelerated this understanding; “changing the conversation” and much enhancing its ability to advance CSP goals in the near term. In a region where the mindset of civic leaders and the public is fixed on the idea that higher-density housing in the suburbs is impossible, trying to gain support for affordable housing in the suburbs is extremely difficult. If, however, civic leaders and the public have already learned that the market possibilities have changed, an effort to build momentum for affordable housing can be more productive.

¹⁰The property is located in one of the CSP demonstration corridors, although it was not a part of the CSP plan for that corridor.
LESSONS: REINFORCING NNIP THEMES

There are many lessons in the MARC CSP experience that planners and policy makers in other regions are likely to find useful. From a policy standpoint, probably most important is the benefit of MARC’s choice to work on its three main sustainability goals interactively as part of the same strategy: social equity, environmental sustainability, and economic development. In doing so, MARC showed how these goals were mutually supportive. In fact, success with any one goal may well depend on success with the other two. The lesson here is that focusing on only one goal would prohibit taking advantage of the synergies that exist when goals are pursued together and could well threaten achievement across the board. This is certainly in line with NNIP’s tradition of looking at issues comprehensively.

Other lessons arise that are central to the DNA of NNIP. One is the benefit of relying on trusted local intermediaries to advance community goals, primarily through supporting learning by the stakeholders themselves. MARC’s approach almost always depended on education first. Instead of telling community stakeholders what to do (or doing it for them), the effort was to help them gain a clear understanding of the nature of the problems they faced and of the true range of potential solutions. Often the process changed the conventional wisdom dramatically—stakeholders came out with a different mindset than they had when they went in. When they were ready to think about designing new programs, MARC was there to help by providing technical assistance, training, forums, and other supports.

A related benefit of many trusted local intermediaries like MARC is their longevity. Because it is a permanent institution, MARC was able to continue the substantive momentum of CSP even after the federal grant period had ended. There is a parallel benefit on the data side. Like all NNIP partners, MARC has pledged to keep its data systems up to date over the long term so the data will be available for use in implementation and further planning when local stakeholders need them.

Providing neighborhood-level data and structuring it for use in decisionmaking is central to the work of all NNIP partners. In almost all phases of CSP, fresh data and new ways to look at them are what made MARC’s education efforts convincing. Real change to outmoded mindsets would not have otherwise occurred. And MARC’s work was clearly consistent with NNIP’s emphasis on using data from multiple sources that capture a holistic view of neighborhood conditions and change. Such work fosters thinking and planning that ranges across topical silos, a key theme in all of today’s better informed place-based initiatives.
It is important to stress that whereas the data were essential, they alone were not sufficient. Needed also were new ways to frame and present the data so that they became easier to understand and to use in decisionmaking—a theme that NNIP also emphasizes. Sometimes this gets done through well-structured and compelling presentation formats, but sometimes automated tools are critical as well. In CSP, the data and the tools together were fundamental to credibility in the processes of making data-driven choices in corridor selection, designing economically viable redevelopment scenarios, and beginning to understand what might be done to reduce concentrated poverty. Building well-structured data systems and frameworks and tools to put them to effective use, warrant high priority in today’s efforts to improve the overall effectiveness of local governance.

11In addition to the tools noted here (Envision Tomorrow and its tool kit on modifying codes), MARC is becoming more reliant on web-based tools in other areas. For example, it has compiled a natural resource inventory that allows it to do extensive environmental analysis of proposed development projects. Its staff members emphasize, however, that they still have much to learn about how to apply such tools for maximum effect.

12For information on trends in the use of community information in decisionmaking, see Kingsley, Coulton, and Pettit (2014) and Cytron et al (2014).
REFERENCES


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NNIP is a collaboration between the Urban Institute and partner organizations in more than three dozen American cities. NNIP partners democratize data: they make it accessible and easy to understand and then help local stakeholders apply it to solve problems in their communities.

For more information about NNIP, go to www.neighborhoodindicators.org or email nnip@urban.org.