



2012 WASHINGTON IDEAS FORUM

WORKING SUMMIT OVERVIEW: CITIES AND SMART ENERGY INFRASTRUCTURE

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CITIES AND SMART ENERGY INFRASTRUCTURE: *Making growing cities more efficient and sustainable*

THE CONVERSATION

Focusing broadly on what makes cities “resilient” enough to withstand disasters and use resources efficiently, this conversation on cities and smart energy touched on everything from infrastructure and government funding to design and historic preservation. Participants included experts in energy, city governance, architecture, social media, and business, with the diversity of perspectives effectively highlighting the complexity surrounding sustainable urban development.

The Aspen Institute’s David Monsma opened the day by looking to the future: we should expect more than 5 billion people living in cities by 2030, he said, and we can only imagine how this urban population growth will drain our collective global resources by 2050. Given that the water and energy infrastructure in most cities needs to be rebuilt and redesigned, the desire for “smart” development has been driving conversations about cities, he said, marking a shift away from theorists like Howard Kunstler.

Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton argued that current economic trends, especially among young people, will drive the development of “walkable suburbs.” Norton also noted the importance of cooperation between the public and private sectors for infrastructure improvement, launching a discussion on the problematic policy environment surrounding urban development between Monsma and several participants. Former Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist noted that “there’s a problem with the federal government – it skews rural. Rural and suburban electrification programs come at the expense of cities,” showing that strong urban infrastructure development depends on much more than funding.

The American Society of Civil Engineers’ Patrick Natale pointed out that consumer prices and perceptions shape development possibilities. For example, consumers are willing to pay much more for bottled water than tap, even though the value is not all that different. If the price of tap water increased, that money could be reinvested into more efficient water treatment and distribution infrastructure.

This concept of consumer-driven development later crystalized with an idea articulated by Oscar Salazar of Citivox and Anne Guiney of the Institute for Urban Design: a smart consumer who has access to information about sustainability and takes action in her community could be more powerful than any macro-level policy. Salazar, who developed a smartphone application to improve civic engagement, argued that data and social media can be harnessed to empower citizens to make efficient choices. Donna Cooper of the Center for American Progress suggested that access to information would encourage citizens to develop and enforce social expectations about sustainable behavior.

Access to information requires that accurate, depoliticized information actually *exists*, though, and many of the participants emphasized the need for meaningful benchmarks for achievements in sustainable development. In particular, Gerry Mooney, IBM’s Vice President of Global Smarter Cities, expressed frustration with the lack of “measurable movement” in sustainable development. He suggested that benchmarks like LEED should be expanded and continuously updated so that developers of all sorts – ranging from construction firms to road

builders – are expected to plan for improving technology and increased sustainability over time. Building on that idea, Robert Zahradnik of the Pew Center on the States suggested that non-governmental organizations would have to play a strong role in creating and enforcing these assessment standards, reinforcing earlier arguments about the power of public-private partnerships.

Appropriately, the District of Columbia was used as a case study throughout the conversation, and the group seemed fairly optimistic about the city’s potential as a future urban center. In particular, architect Julian Hunt and *Washington Post* art and architecture critic Philip Kennicott emphasized the stylistic elements of urban development, arguing that cultural centers are created and sustained by smart design and efficient use of space. Commenting on efficiency, Kaid Benfield of the Natural Resources Defense Council argued that urban leaders should approach energy and environmental problems with an eye to the needs of the full metropolitan area surrounding a city. As Natale pointed out, issues like transportation are regional, not local, and taking a broader view of urban development will improve efficiency and help channel resources more effectively.

Monsma closed with a note on chaos theory: although it may seem like the needs of each city are too specific to draw sweeping conclusions about infrastructure development, certain common trends point to policy solutions that can be implemented across different communities. He believes that “urban populations and urban centers [will be] the place that people shift toward in the future,” prompting policymakers to think strategically about creating a smart urban infrastructure for the next generation.

FIVE BIG IDEAS

1. Access to data, information, and social media will empower “smart citizens” who can act to make their communities more sustainable.
2. Public-private partnerships for urban development can change public perceptions about infrastructure policy priorities and affordable consumer price points for utilities.
3. Urban centers will continue to grow over the next two decades, and city planners should plan to update suburban neighborhoods and incorporate surrounding areas as they look to the future.
4. Design and aesthetics matter in smart infrastructure development, particularly because they encourage cultural growth.
5. More robust sustainability benchmarks are needed for all kinds of infrastructure, particularly because they help experts understand common challenges shared among different cities.

ATTENDEES

Moderator: David Monsma *Executive Director, Energy and Environment Program* **Aspen Institute**

Host: Jay Lauf *Vice President and Publisher* **The Atlantic**

Participants:

- Frances Beinecke *President* **Natural Resources Defense Council**
- Kaid Benfield *Director of the Sustainable Communities and Smart Growth Program* **Natural Resources Defense Council**
- Tony Clifford *Chief Executive Officer* **Standard Solar**
- Elliot Cohen *Founder and CEO* **City Maps**
- Donna Cooper *Senior Fellow* **Center for American Progress**
- Anne Guiney *Executive Director* **Institute for Urban Design**

- Marcia Hale *President* **Building America's Future Educational Fund**
- Julian Hunt *Founder and Interim Chairman* **The Arts Coalition for the Dupont Underground**
- Philip Kennicott *Art and Architecture Critic* **The Washington Post**
- Tom Kuhn *President* **Edison Electric Institute**
- Ali Malkawi *Professor of Architecture; Founder and Director, T.C. Chan Center for Building Simulation and Energy Studies; Chair, Graduate Group in Architecture* **University of Pennsylvania**
- Michael McKelvy *President, Government, Environment, and Infrastructure Division* **CH2M Hill**
- Gerry Mooney *Vice President, Global Smarter Cities* **IBM**
- Patrick Natale *Executive Director and Chief Staff Officer* **American Society of Civil Engineers**
- John Norquist *President and Chief Executive Officer* **Congress for New Urbanism**
- Eleanor Holmes Norton *Ranking Member, House Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings and Emergency Management* **United States House of Representatives**
- Joseph Osha *Alternative Energy/Solar Senior Research Analyst* **Bank of America Merrill Lynch**
- Oscar Salazar *Founder and CEO* **Citivox**
- Phil Sharp *President* **Resources for the Future**
- Marcy Simon *Senior Advisor* **Burson-Marsteller**
- Robert Zahradnik *Director of Research* **Pew Center on the States**