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SUSTAINABILITY: MORE THAN JUST BRICKS

Quick: when you think of the word “sustainability,” what comes to mind? For many, a picture of a building may pop into their head. And for good reason. Many leading sustainability organizations focus specifically on bricks-and-mortar issues. In fact, one of the dominant players in the field – the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) – is seen as a driving force of an industry projected to contribute \$554 billion to the U.S. gross domestic product from 2009 to 2013.

And who could dispute the importance of the built environment? According to the USGBC, buildings in the United States are responsible for 39 percent of CO² (carbon dioxide) emissions, 40 percent of energy consumption, 13 percent of water consumption, and 15 percent of GDP (gross domestic product) per year. More dramatically, they claim that greater building efficiency can meet 85 percent of future U.S. demand for energy! Clearly, energy-efficient buildings have become the “poster child” for the movement. Yet, sustainable communities, businesses, and programs are so much more than “just bricks.”

Buildings (energy efficient or not) need vibrant businesses to pay the rent. And those businesses need a comprehensive revitalization and management effort, such as a Main Street organization, to minimize their (investment) risk and maximize their (market) potential. Those organizations, in turn, need people and money – in the form of volunteers and funding – to keep the doors open. The people who give their time and dollars to a local Main Street effort also need resources – from the state and national level – to learn best practices and develop successful initiatives.

In short, without comprehensive revitalization and long-term management of our community centers, the promise and potential of truly sustainable communities will remain elusive. The independent, isolated actions of millions of decision makers on Main Streets across the country present an enormous challenge. Consider that by some estimates, there are:

30,000 cities across the United States with populations under 50,000, each possessing at least one traditional commercial center in need of continuing revitalization and development;

3 million older and independently owned buildings fill these districts. While some have undergone modest-to-substantial rehabilitation over the past few decades, fewer have addressed the need for energy efficiency in a significant way; and

5 million small and independent businesses – by similar calculations – might occupy these buildings, many of which are not owner occupied... resulting in a significant challenge to coordinate and drive action on potential community-wide goals.

How can we sustain all those buildings, businesses, districts, and programs? At the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP), our commitment is focused in two broad areas: policy and practice.

Through the Preservation Green Lab and Sustainability Program (see page 25), the National Trust will work with several cities to develop model policies that encourage preservation as sustainable development. This work will include refining building, energy, and zoning codes, as well working to expand the availability of historic tax credits at the state and federal level.

By supporting state and local partners, the Trust will provide our network of practitioners with the tools they need – through the development and dissemination of best practices and other guidance for greening older and historic buildings. For 2010, we are excited to launch a new plank to our sustainability program. Called Main Street GREEN, it is designed to capture the best thinking and innovative strategies on sustainable Main Streets and to create a national action plan to retrofit buildings and districts throughout the Main Street network.

Our first step will be to conduct a comprehensive in-depth survey of local issues and innovations on the subject. This assessment will identify specific activities in LEED (leadership in energy

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and environmental design) certifications, energy audits, building retrofits, green business certifications, municipal policies, energy conservation, public infrastructure upgrades, water conservation and management, alternative energy systems, transportation improvements, local food systems, and “buy local” campaigns. What will emerge will be a picture of Main Streets that incorporates broad, inclusive principles for environmental, economic, and social sustainability goals.

Later this year, we hope to leverage this fresh data to forge a powerful coalition of federal, national, state, and local leaders by convening leading practitioners and partners in the field of sustainability and Main Street revitalization during a focused event at NTHP headquarters in Washington, D.C. Our goal: to create a roadmap to place Main Street at the center of the sustainability movement.

This is our second annual “green issue,” and as you thumb through the pages, you’ll see how profound the issues are – and how diverse the solutions have become. From growing your own entrepreneurs through cooperative businesses to building an enduring political constituency through social media advocacy, local leaders are creating sustainable solutions in every corner of the Main Street network.