

# Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities 2016-2017 Request for Letters of Interest



## Overview

Communities across the United States are exploring smart growth and other environmentally sustainable approaches to revitalize their economies, create jobs, protect clean air and water, prepare for climate change-related impacts, and improve quality of life. However, when trying to implement these approaches, many communities run into barriers such as outdated zoning codes and other obstacles, lack of consensus around where and how to grow, and misconceptions about the cost and complexity of environmentally sustainable approaches. Moreover, many communities lack the technical expertise to implement smart growth strategies and the resources to educate local stakeholders about the environmental, economic, health, and quality of life benefits these approaches can bring.

The Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities Program provides quick, targeted technical assistance to selected communities using a variety of tools that have demonstrated results and widespread application. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) delivers the assistance using teams of experts who conduct workshops in the selected communities. The program is geared toward communities that are relatively new to environmentally sustainable approaches but have a basic understanding of smart growth principles and how they apply locally. Communities most appropriate for Building Blocks assistance can articulate their unique challenges and are trying to kick-start efforts to address a specific local issue.

## Key Information

- **Eligibility:** The applicant can be a local, county, or tribal government, or a nonprofit organization that has the support of the local government on whose behalf they are applying.
- **Deadline:** 5:00 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time on October 12, 2016
- **How to apply:** Submit the fillable PDF letter of interest, along with a short letter of support signed by a mayor, city manager, elected official, or other representative of the community, to [BuildingBlocks@epa.gov](mailto:BuildingBlocks@epa.gov) (see “How to Apply”).
- **Tools offered:**
  - Tool 1: Creating Equitable Development
  - Tool 2: Planning for Infill Development
  - Tool 3: Sustainable Strategies for Small Cities and Rural Areas
  - Tool 4: Flood Resilience for Riverine and Coastal Communities
  - Tool 5: Green and Complete Streets
- **Timeframe:** EPA expects to select 25 recipients by November 2016 and provide all technical assistance by July 2017.

## How the Program Works

1. Communities submit a letter of interest, in which they select one of the five tools being offered (see “How to Apply”) and specifically outline how the tool is relevant to their challenge. Communities can submit multiple letters of interest, but each letter should be specific to one tool.

2. EPA reviews the letters of interest and selects 25 communities for assistance. Reviewers will include staff from EPA's Office of Sustainable Communities and EPA's 10 regional offices. EPA may also consult other agencies, such as Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Department of Transportation (DOT). We expect to select recipients by November 2016 and will notify those who were not selected. EPA is working to make these tools publicly available to communities for their use with limited outside assistance.
3. EPA contacts the selected communities to schedule a workshop, discuss mutual expectations as well as roles and responsibilities, and review details about the program. During at least two conference calls before the workshop, direct consultation occurs between EPA staff and technical experts and local decision-makers whose work relates to the specific challenge for which the community is seeking assistance. The relevant decision-makers will vary by community and depend on the tool being delivered but might include planning, transportation, environmental, and economic development department heads; commissioners; senior municipal staff; and elected officials. For example, the *Planning for Infill Development* tool might require meetings with the city manager or mayor, head of the department of economic development, local or regional business owners, local developers, and elected officials.
4. EPA's contractors, along with EPA headquarters and/or regional office staff, conduct a one- to two-day workshop in the community to deliver the technical assistance, which includes a community meeting. Workshops will occur between January and July 2017. A "Next Steps" memo identifying options for specific next steps the community could follow to implement the ideas generated during the technical assistance workshop is delivered to the community.

## How to Apply

Complete and submit the fillable PDF letter of interest (available at <https://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/building-blocks-sustainable-communities-2016-2017-request-letters-interest>), being sure to include the information in numbers 1-8 below. Applicants may select only one type of assistance per letter of interest. Communities can submit multiple letters of interest, but the nature of the challenge should correspond with each tool requested. (Please **do not** submit maps or other supplemental information.) **No previously submitted letters of interest will be considered. Only letters submitted in response to this request for letters of interest will be considered for assistance.**

1. **Identify the ONE tool for which you are seeking assistance.** Select one (1) of the five (5) tools described on pages 5-9.
2. **Describe the nature of the smart growth or sustainable communities-related challenge(s) facing your community,** including any relevant data to demonstrate the challenge. If applicable, describe how this challenge affects low-income, minority, tribal, and/or other communities facing disproportionate environmental or health risks.
3. **Explain the relevance of the selected tool to the challenge(s), being as specific as possible.** Applicants must describe how the community's issues can be addressed through the technical assistance workshop, focusing on why the requested tool will help with a specific challenge. Specifically:

- For **Tool 1: Creating Equitable Development**, indicate the areas of focus (see page 5) the workshop would focus on and how they are connected to the community’s challenge.
  - For **Tool 2: Planning for Infill Development**, indicate what, if any, economic development is occurring in your community. Also indicate what steps your community has already taken to encourage infill development, including policies, code changes, partnerships, or other strategies.
  - For **Tool 3: Sustainable Strategies for Small Cities and Rural Areas**, indicate which three to four specific areas of focus (see page 7) the workshop would focus on and how they are connected to the community’s challenge.
  - For **Tool 4: Flood Resilience for Riverine and Coastal Communities**, indicate whether your community is on a river or coast and whether the community has done any flood mapping.
  - For **Tool 5: Green and Complete Streets**, indicate whether your community has adopted a complete streets policy and how familiar your community is with green infrastructure for stormwater management.
4. **Describe your plan for engaging traditionally underrepresented communities**, including low-income, minority, tribal, and/or overburdened<sup>1</sup> communities, in the technical assistance workshop.
  5. **Identify your preferred timing for the workshop.** The proposed timeframe for these workshops is between January and July 2017. Please provide a preliminary idea of the best dates for your community.
  6. **Describe the community’s expected capacity for implementation**, e.g., local policy change, additional consideration for physical improvements, new incentives, etc. EPA generally looks to assist communities that are ready for implementation once the Building Blocks workshop and next steps memo are complete.
  7. If applicable, **describe how this assistance would complement work being done in the community using other federal funding** (e.g., EPA brownfields grants, HUD Community Development Block Grants, DOT TIGER grants) and/or how this workshop would align with a local or regional planning process.
  8. **Affirm that the community can provide the information or materials listed in the “What the Community Provides” section of each tool description.**

Please also include a letter of support signed by a mayor, city manager, elected official, or other representative of the community. **This signature represents the community’s support and**

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<sup>1</sup> An overburdened community is defined as a community with “minority, low-income, tribal, and indigenous populations and communities in the United States that experience disproportionate environmental harms and risks as a result of greater vulnerability to environmental hazards. This increased vulnerability may be attributable to an accumulation of negative and a lack of positive environmental, health, economic, or social conditions within these populations or communities.”

**commitment to this program and assistance.** Please save the letter of support using the following format: Name of Jurisdiction Name of State Support. For example: Catonsville Maryland Support.

**Please save your fillable PDF file using the following format:** Name of Jurisdiction Name of State and corresponding tool number (#x) based on the following list. For example: Catonsville Maryland #1.

Tool #1: Creating Equitable Development  
Tool #2: Planning for Infill Development  
Tool #3: Sustainable Strategies for Small Cities  
and Rural Areas

Tool #4: Flood Resilience for Riverine and  
Coastal Communities  
Tool #5: Green and Complete Streets

The letter of interest and the letter of support must be submitted to [BuildingBlocks@epa.gov](mailto:BuildingBlocks@epa.gov) no later than **October 12, 2016, at 5:00 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time.**

If you have questions about this request for letters of interest, please see our Frequently Asked Questions webpage at <https://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/frequently-asked-questions-faqs-about-building-blocks-sustainable-communities>. If your question is not answered there, please contact Mr. Gurkin at [Gurkin.Charles@epa.gov](mailto:Gurkin.Charles@epa.gov) or 202-564-2778.

#### **EPA's Role**

EPA bears full responsibility for contracting the services to be provided and distributing an appropriate number of hard-copy publications and/or tools to the community. EPA staff will be integrally involved in all planning, including planning the workshop, and reviewing all materials developed in association with the workshop.

## TOOL 1: CREATING EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT

New development and growth is not always equally beneficial to all community members. This tool will help communities evaluate their priorities to work toward equitable development.

### Community Benefits

Although economic growth and revitalization are common goals in most communities, achieving these goals is frequently accompanied by concerns that new development will displace existing residents, particularly in low-income communities. Equitable development principles give communities a path to improve their quality of life and economic opportunities while ensuring existing residents are not displaced and can share in the benefits of these improvements. Equitable development is not just about affordable housing; it includes the full range of factors that contribute to residents' quality of life, such as access to high-quality employment; safe, walkable neighborhoods; regional transportation connections; environmentally safe and healthy communities; and the other amenities, services, and community institutions residents need to thrive.

### Areas of Focus

Each community will receive a self-assessment questionnaire to help identify its goals and needs, including a step-by-step guide to gathering key existing-conditions metrics in neighborhoods, structured around the following components:

- Preservation and development of **housing** that is affordable to a range of income levels.
- Preservation and strengthening of **commercial business districts** and locally important destinations.
- Access to high-quality **employment** opportunities for local residents.
- Inclusion of **transportation options** that are inclusive and strategically connected.
- Preservation of opportunities for **legacy residents**, businesses, and future generations.

In the workshop, participants will review the findings of the assessment and identify the tool(s) most relevant to addressing community priorities, goals and context. Experts will also provide specific options for next steps, including the identification of key community institutions and potential partnerships.

### Who Should Attend:

- / Elected officials.
- / City/county staff, including economic development and planning staff.
- / Community and neighborhood leaders.
- / Local environmental justice advocates.
- / Other stakeholders.

### How It Works:

- / Community will complete a self-assessment before the workshop.
- / One- to two-day session will begin with a public workshop to gather community input.
- / Consultants will conduct an in-depth session with staff and key participants to review community goals and self-assessment, discuss equitable development tools, and match to local needs and context.

### What the Community Provides:

- / Local key contact.
- / Decision-makers' commitment to attend the workshop.
- / Self-assessment and background information on demographics, market conditions, and community issues and concerns.
- / Local logistics, including organization of workshop and tour.
- / Marketing of public workshop.
- / Invitations to key stakeholders to attend work sessions, including local environmental justice advocates.
- / Attendance of key officials and local government staff.

### Outcomes:

- / Knowledge of best practices in equitable development.
- / An understanding of local needs and areas of vulnerability.
- / Identification of strategies to promote equitable growth.
- / Options for next steps and additional data analysis.

## TOOL 2: PLANNING FOR INFILL DEVELOPMENT

This tool will help local governments identify obstacles to infill development and strategies for overcoming those obstacles in their communities.

### Community Benefits

During the post-World War II era, many communities in the United States developed into the outer parts of the region, leaving older neighborhoods, traditional downtowns, and central business districts abandoned or underserved. However, more recently, some communities revitalized their central neighborhoods through infill development—redevelopment of vacant land or properties in neighborhoods with existing infrastructure and development. Economically distressed communities, however, have been less able to attract infill development and attain the accompanying economic, health, and quality of life benefits.

### Areas of Focus

This tool will help communities that have **already identified a priority infill development area and are experiencing some economic growth at the regional level** to determine their readiness to pursue infill development and identify strategies to better position themselves to attract infill development. Each community will conduct a self-assessment questionnaire prior to the workshop to determine which set of strategies are most appropriate to focus on in their context. This self-assessment will be structured around one or more components, which will also provide the framework for the workshop:

- **Policies:** New policies that might be adopted or existing policies that could be amended to remove obstacles to infill development.
- **Partnerships:** Public and private partnerships that could leverage resources, build capacity, and coordinate efforts.
- **Perception:** Improving perceptions of an area to strengthen demand and reduce the perceived risk for lenders.
- **Funding:** Standard and innovative funding options to support development and fund infrastructure.

In the workshop, participants will review the findings of the self-assessment, and national experts will lead participants in matching the appropriate strategies to advance the goals for a specific priority development area. Experts will also help identify options for next steps and provide relevant case studies.

### **Who Should Attend:**

- / Elected officials, city manager, mayor.
- / City/county staff, including economic development, transportation, and planning staff.
- / Local developers.
- / Community and neighborhood organizations.
- / Local environmental justice advocates.
- / Other stakeholders.

### **How It Works:**

- / Community will complete a self-assessment before the workshop.
- / One- to two-day session will begin with a site visit to the community's priority development area.
- / Consultants will conduct an in-depth session with decision-makers, staff, and key participants to review local goals, data on priority development area, and the self-assessment, and to discuss specific infill development strategies.

### **What the Community Provides:**

- / Local key contact.
- / Decision-makers' commitment to attend the workshop.
- / Self-assessment and background information on priority development area such as market conditions.
- / Local logistics, including organization of workshop and tour.
- / Marketing of public workshop
- / Invitations to key stakeholders (especially representatives of local developers) to attend work sessions.
- / Attendance of key officials and local government staff.

### **Outcomes:**

- / Knowledge of best practices and infill development strategies.
- / An understanding of the community's readiness to pursue infill development.
- / Identification of specific strategies to promote infill development.
- / Options for next steps and case studies.

## TOOL 3: SUSTAINABLE STRATEGIES FOR SMALL CITIES AND RURAL AREAS

This workshop, tailored to small cities and towns in rural areas, helps communities closely evaluate how well their zoning codes, policies, and programs align with smart growth principles.

### Community Benefits

Identifying barriers to smart growth in local development codes, programs, initiatives, and policies will help small cities and towns promote community goals, sustainable and efficient development patterns, and economic growth. This workshop will help participants understand the basic principles of smart growth and potential changes the community could adopt to promote compact, walkable communities that encourage investment in existing neighborhoods while preserving farmland and open space. Participants will develop an initial list of priority areas on which to focus in their local codes, policies and programs, and strategies to address challenges.

### Areas of Focus

This tool will use sections of EPA's [Smart Growth Self-Assessment for Rural Communities](#) to help communities analyze their local development codes, zoning, and programmatic initiatives. The community will select two to four sections of the audit tool, listed below, on which it would like to focus and describe its goals or efforts so far in these topic areas.

- Strengthen the Local and Regional Economies
- Engage and Connect Community Members
- Improve Health and Promote Active Living
- Protect Natural Habitats and Ecosystems
- Support Productive Agriculture for a Variety of Markets
- Meet Housing Needs for Different Ages and Incomes
- Revitalize Villages and Town Centers
- Preserve Historic and Cultural Resources
- Provide Transportation Choices
- Invest in Efficient Public Infrastructure and Operations
- Increase Energy Efficiency and Provide Renewable Energy

The presentations and discussions will focus on implementation issues and strategies drawing on experiences in other rural communities, along with resources and tools the community can use to reach its goals.

### **Who Should Attend:**

- / Elected officials and key staff.
- / Community and neighborhood leaders.
- / Builders, developers, and business owners.
- / Landowners.
- / Local environmental justice advocates.
- / Other stakeholders.

### **How It Works:**

- / Community will complete an audit before the workshop.
- / One- to two-day session with community leaders and staff begins with an overview of smart growth principles and some typical disconnects between those principles, community goals, and local development codes and policies.
- / Best practices in other communities.
- / Driving/walking tour of the community to discuss priority fixes to perceived problems on the ground.
- / Hands-on working session with local officials to conduct an initial assessment and identify priority fixes and a strategy for implementing them.

### **What the Community Provides:**

- / Local key contact.
- / Decision-makers' commitment to attend the workshop.
- / Self-Assessment and background information for audit, such as local codes and plans.
- / Local logistics, including organization of workshop and tour.
- / Marketing of public workshop
- / Invitations to key stakeholders to attend work sessions
- / Attendance of key officials and local government staff.

### **Outcomes:**

- / Identification of local smart growth goals and options for code changes to implement them.
- / Understanding of smart growth principles and how zoning codes and initiatives can help accomplish them.
- / Specific list of local priority fixes and tips and advice on implementation strategies.

## TOOL 4: FLOOD RESILIENCE FOR RIVERINE AND COASTAL COMMUNITIES

This workshop helps communities prepare for climate change-related flooding and plan for future disaster resilience by assessing local plans, policies, and development regulations to identify approaches they can take to become more resilient to future floods.

### Community Benefits

Many communities are experiencing more frequent and severe storms that result in flooding, even in areas not previously thought to be flood-prone. Communities along rivers can experience inundation and erosion. Coastal communities have the additional challenges of sea level rise and land subsidence. The workshop walks the community through an assessment tool to help gauge the community's readiness. The workshop will help the community identify options for updating its plans (such as comprehensive land use and hazard mitigation plans), policies, and development regulations, and applying green infrastructure approaches to become more resilient to floods in the community and watershed.

While any flood-prone community could benefit from using this tool, communities that have already assessed and mapped their risks of flooding and other natural hazards, using the best available science, will be in a better position to discuss options and make choices that lead to long-term resilience. Communities in both coastal and riverine areas will find the tool useful.

### Areas of Focus

Participating communities will be introduced to an expanded version of EPA's [Flood Resilience Checklist](#), which is divided into four areas:

- Overall strategies to enhance flood resilience.
- Conserve land and discourage development in river corridors (and other flood-prone areas).
- Protect people, buildings and facilities in vulnerable settlements.
- Plan for and encourage new development in safer areas.

### **Who Should Attend:**

- / Elected officials and key staff.
- / City planning and zoning staff.
- / Hazard mitigation and emergency management staff.
- / Local environmental justice advocates.
- / Other stakeholders.

### **How It Works:**

- / Community will complete a self-assessment before the workshop.
- / One- to two-day session with community leaders and staff begins with an overview of the role of smart growth and green infrastructure in flood resilience.
- / Review of the assessment results and discussion of options for addressing gaps, including examples from other communities.
- / Facilitated discussion of options for improving flood resilience.

### **What the Community Provides:**

- / Local key contact.
- / Decision-makers' commitment to attend the workshop.
- / Self-assessment and background information, such as local codes and plans and flood assessment risk analysis (if available).
- / Local logistics, including organization of workshop and tour
- / Marketing of public workshop
- / Invitations to key stakeholders to attend work sessions
- / Attendance of key officials and local government staff.

### **Outcomes:**

- / Identification of the current state of local plans, policies, and regulations to determine how they will help the community become more resilient to future floods.
- / Identification of potential strategies to improve resilience, including but not limited to green infrastructure.



## TOOL 5: GREEN AND COMPLETE STREETS

A green and complete street incorporates green infrastructure to manage stormwater while making the street more aesthetically appealing and safer for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, and drivers. This tool will help communities develop strategies for greening their streets based on national models and case studies.

### Community Benefits

This tool will showcase a range of national best practices for incorporating a green and complete streets strategy for public areas in the street right-of-way. Communities will learn about green infrastructure elements such as street trees, rain gardens, and permeable paving. Communities will also learn how to develop interdepartmental cooperation, maintenance strategies, and funding mechanisms to implement and maintain green streets. These actions could result in reduced pollution, reduced flooding, increased green space, improved air quality, and reduced demand on a community's sewer collection system. Beyond the environmental benefits, green and complete streets strategies can also make the streets more pleasant for pedestrians and bicyclists while still accommodating automobiles.

### Areas of Focus

The focus of this assistance will be an assessment of the existing conditions for four to six street locations in the community. Assistance will include options for incorporating a variety of green and complete street concepts and ideas into local practice and setting the policy and organizational framework to effectively implement green and complete street concepts. See EPA's webpage [Green Streets](#) webpage for more information.

### **Who Should Attend:**

- / Elected officials.
- / City/county staff, including public works and transportation staff.
- / Community and neighborhood leaders.
- / Other stakeholders.

### **How It Works:**

- / One- to two-day assistance includes a morning work session with local government officials and other key stakeholders, a tour of existing green infrastructure installations, an afternoon meeting with local government leaders, and an evening public workshop.

### **What the Community Provides:**

- / Local key contact.
- / Decision-makers' commitment to attend the workshop.
- / Self-assessment and background information on current and planned sustainability initiatives.
- / Local logistics, including organization of workshop and tour.
- / Marketing of public workshop.
- / Invitations to key stakeholders to attend work sessions.
- / Attendance of key officials and local government staff.

### **Outcomes:**

- / An understanding of the relationship between smart growth and green and complete streets.
- / An understanding of how green and complete streets help a community meet its environmental goals.
- / Identification of barriers to green and complete streets and how to address them.
- / A framework to guide the creation of a long-term green and complete streets strategy.