

South suburbs honored for housing collaboration

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In January, the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association invited its member communities to discuss a novel approach to housing issues - municipal cooperation. At the end of that meeting, approximately 20 towns signed up to explore this idea a little further.

Just five months later, the South Suburban Housing Collaborative is off and running, having recently hired its first director of housing initiatives and now gaining national attention as a promising suburban model for addressing housing needs and an innovative example of how to use funds coming from the federal economic stimulus package.

After the initial January meeting, the interested communities formed a steering committee to guide the effort, which focused on how to be as strategic as possible with funding from the Neighborhood Stabilization Program, a federal initiative to deal with foreclosed and abandoned

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homes. The hope is that by smartly targeting these limited NSP dollars, a lasting impact can be achieved in the south suburbs.

To that end, 17 communities passed resolutions in support of a joint NSP application, which was submitted to the state of Illinois in early May. A similar joint application will soon be submitted to Cook County, which like the state has also received NSP funding from the federal government.

This south suburban effort was never just about NSP, though. This federal program has been the initial focus, but the broader goal is to provide the participating communities with a new approach to addressing shared housing challenges, which often do not adhere to municipal boundaries.

Not every community has the resources to hire dedicated housing staff. Working together allows towns to share knowledge and expertise across borders, operate more efficiently and attract more investment. This effort can support and enhance existing economic development initiatives and help create more jobs in the area. Collaboration also provides a platform for integrating energy efficiency into housing and thoughtfully linking the intertwined issues of housing and transportation.

The efforts of the collaborative are getting both support and attention from local and national institutions.

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The Metropolitan Mayors Caucus and the Metropolitan Planning Council have been supporting the collaborative since the beginning. The Chicago Community Trust recently awarded a grant to the collaborative to hire its director of housing initiatives, who will lay the groundwork for this new effort and provide needed assistance on housing issues in the participating communities.

In a national webcast, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development recently featured the collaborative as one of three innovative approaches from around the country for using stimulus funding. The collaborative hopes to keep the south suburbs at the forefront of housing policy and improve the overall quality of life in the sub-region.

Ed Paesel is Executive Director of the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association. The opinion expressed in this column is the writer's and not necessarily that of The Times.