

**THE AFRICAN AMERICAN FORUM ON RACE & REGIONALISM:
PROMOTING AFRICAN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES
ON EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT, REGIONAL EQUITY & SMART GROWTH**

**DEEJOHN FERRIS, PRESIDENT
SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT GROUP, INC.**

**June 13, 2007
Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies
Washington, DC¹**

INTRODUCTION

Nationally, a broadening coalition has begun to emerge addressing the tensions posed by the process of planning and public policy decision making on metropolitan and rural community development. Environmentalists, health professionals, planners, developers and community advocates are coalescing to develop an antidote to sprawl, specifically, a new metropolitan agenda centered on principles of smart growth. In this context, smart growth can be characterized as sustainability from a conservation perspective focused on limited and transit oriented development, pro-open space and green space preservation.

Except for a relatively small percentage of activists and scholars, few in this expanding coalition are scrutinizing the nexus between smart growth and economic, social and regional development and impacts in low income and communities of color. Despite the negative consequences of sprawl in African American communities, largely, the voices and views of African Americans on sustainability, land use and regionalism trends aren't factored into the smart growth public policy debate. The African American Forum on Race & Regionalism was established in 2002 by the Ford Foundation to strengthen the voices of African Americans in deploying and generating data, in policy dialogues, project implementation and place-based work.

African American activists, leaders and scholars are helping to re-define smart growth in terms relevant to this important constituency – revitalization of Black metropolitan and rural communities that have suffered from sprawl-driven inequities, long-term public and private sector disinvestments and environmental degradation. The African American Forum on Race & Regionalism is helping by building upon the leadership, strengths and experiences of African Americans whose historic contributions have shaped progressive community development policy and public and private sector investments.

¹ This June 13, 2007 meeting in Washington, DC is part of a collaborative project of the African American Forum on Race & Regionalism and the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies involving targeted education on equitable regionalism and strengthening the capacity of Black elected officials at the local, state, regional and national levels.

African American Forum on Race & Regionalism

Email: info@aafr.org

Web: <http://www.aafr.org>

Web: <http://sustainablecommunitydevelopmentgroup.org>

For African Americans, the planning and policy lens is equitable development. The central challenge is creating sustainable metropolitan and rural communities through sound decisions that respect the linkages between land use, the environment, education, infrastructure investments, transportation mobility, community health and economic prosperity.

Various social justice and equity movements in the U.S. are embedded in and strongly influenced by African American communities and experiences, however, these relationships are under-explored and unappreciated. Equally significant, when distanced from their African American moorings and the equity component diminishes in significance, many of these movements become negative for African American communities.

The African American Forum on Race & Regionalism focuses on equitable development through partnerships, coalition building and education which ensures that the lessons of land use, race and class and the contributions of African Americans to the field are recognized and integrated, that anti-sprawl and regional solutions are relevant in African American communities, and problem solving approaches broaden economic prosperity, protect civil rights and the environment.

Spearheaded by Carl Anthony, while he was a program officer at the Ford Foundation, the African American Forum on Race & Regionalism (AAFRR) is guided by a partnership comprised of four organizations. Leaders of three of these organizations are co-chairs of the Forum. They are leaders in the field: Robert Bullard, director of the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University; John A. Powell, director of the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Ohio State University; and Angela Glover Blackwell, founder and CEO of PolicyLink.

The fourth partner and the Secretariat for the African American Forum on Race & Regionalism, is Sustainable Community Development Group, Inc., a not-for-profit corporation on the forefront of working with the public, private and community sectors to advance environmental sustainability, equitable development and global smart growth.

BACKGROUND

Incorporating social, economic and environmental justice and civil rights advocacy, African American scholars and activists situate racial inequity at the center of both the causes of sprawl and effective, problem solving regional equity and growth solutions. African Americans constitute a sizeable segment of the population in sprawl threatened cities, suburbs and rural areas. Framed from an African American perspective, arguably, sustainability and equitable development are cardinal civil rights issues for the millennium.

African American Forum on Race & Regionalism

Email: info@aafr.org

Web: <http://www.aafr.org>

Web: <http://sustainablecommunitydevelopmentgroup.org>

Spatial arrangement is one of the most important ways to distribute and arrange prosperity and access to opportunities in the United States. Important controversial issues around environment, housing, education, taxes, transportation, workforce and business development and jobs are inextricably bound with space, land use and race. These concerns are characterized by disproportionate environmental impacts, urban and rural disinvestments, white flight and a cities-versus-suburbs stance.

Race, Class and Land Use

For African Americans and other communities of color, sprawl is the undesirable consequence of state, federal and local governmental laws, policies and subsidies that encourage suburban migration from urban areas and inhibit healthy rural development. Many of these same governmental initiatives constrain the benefits of expansion and economic growth in communities of color by promoting segregation, inferior education, food insecurity and disinvestments in physical infrastructure including housing, roads, public transportation, health care and environmental protection.

Sprawl has relocated jobs, housing and population, and the equivalent tax base, to the suburbs and exurbs. Resources are diverted from rural areas as well. Equally important, racial discrimination compounds the negative impact of sprawl in African American communities. Research data clearly establishes that decades of federal spending to construct the interstate highway system supported the rapid expansion of metropolitan areas by building roads that galvanized suburban development (e.g., whites) at the expense of cities (e.g., African Americans).

White flight (the reflex that occurred after African Americans migrated in significant numbers to the North usually in pursuit of greater economic opportunities), was facilitated by subsidized roads and increased automobile use. In comparison, public transit that serves people with low incomes in the urban core is, in many cases, either inadequate or non-existent. Additionally, where highways exist, often they vivisect and disrupt communities of color posing safety hazards, compounding air pollution and imperiling public health.

Historically, the impact of Federal Housing Administration and the Veterans Administration homeownership programs, which limited mortgage subsidies to racially homogeneous white neighborhoods, also demonstrates the contributions of discrimination to sprawl. By ignoring the importance of home ownership and needs in communities of color, these programs exacerbated housing segregation nationwide.

Some researchers have cited the contribution of federal public housing policies to the concentration of urban African Americans in poverty and widening the income gap. Scholars have uncovered issues relevant to the connection between governmental investments in water and sewer systems, water quality and sprawl. Data on other sprawl impacts on African Americans include state and local governments such as the exclusionary and discriminatory effects of local zoning on land use in communities of

color that has encouraged environmental degradation, health hazards, blight and low property values.

Other significant factors include racial steering, predatory sub-prime lending and insurance redlining; educational disparities resulting from the expanding chasm between more affluent suburban schools and those in inner cities; and the migration of industry, which has shifted job centers, businesses and income away from cities to the suburbs and exurbs. Essentially, sprawl has resulted in incentives for whites to move farther into the suburbs and exurbs while imposing barriers on African American communities.

Regionalism and Equity

Sprawl is a key contributor to regional inequalities, a major cause of disinvestments that affect cities, suburbs and rural locales. In the absence of a sound regional decision-making approach to public policy on growth and development, sprawl sets up conflicts between them.

Under the auspices of regionalism and smart growth, where economic efficiency is prioritized over equitable development, African Americans have been disenfranchised through redistricting, blocked from low-income and affordable housing opportunities, and restricted from preserving open space in ways that mimic exclusionary zoning. Regionalism also raises concerns for African Americans concerned about diluted voting power and the increasing vulnerability of strong Black districts.

Regional trends in smart growth have considerable impacts on African American communities. One is the return of affluent whites (and others) to the cities catalyzing urban revitalization that does not balance the needs of community residents and locally owned small businesses. Rediscovery of the inner cities and inner ring suburbs is resulting in market-induced neighborhood displacement epitomized by rapidly accelerating property values and taxes, shrinking affordable and low income housing stock. Essentially, economic development that doesn't factor in equity is out-ricing long-term residents, businesses, property owners and workers who in many cases don't have the mobility of alternatives.

OUTCOMES

In the context of metropolitan and rural growth and equitable development, the African American Forum on Race & Regionalism is helping to address economic, social and environmental concerns by:

- acknowledging and honoring the history and uniqueness of the African American community and experiences;
- building upon the leadership, strengths and experiences of African Americans whose historic contributions have shaped progressive urban and rural policy;

- promoting development of a sustainability agenda among communities of color and helping to mobilize them; and
- incorporating the breadth of perspectives critical to an effective political approach to achieving a sustainability agenda.

Historically, public policies, laws, economic incentives and investments have disfavored African American communities. Without African American involvement in development decisions, smart growth threatens to replicate these circumstances over the next several decades. For the African Americans whose communities are under pressure, as in the past, community development, regionalism and smart growth must be situated within the bigger picture of race and equity.

While providing leadership in framing the issues and implementing an action agenda, the African American community cannot act alone in advancing a holistic agenda. Multicultural coalitions and alliances are and will be essential to this work. For example, increasingly around the country, people of color are teaming to create political majorities. Successful leaders will capitalize on this growing phenomenon.

Although it's unlikely that significant advances will occur without the African American community in a central and substantial role, forging strategic alliances and working in coalition are critical to making progress. The African American Forum on Race & Regionalism is a means to promote this multi-stakeholder, multicultural collaboration. The Forum welcomes collaboration and partnerships that will advance networking with key constituencies, information sharing and broadening the national discourse on sustainable communities.