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LIVABLE COMMUNITIES

Across America, there is a growing movement to create *livable communities*; that is, local leaders and residents are evaluating their villages, towns, and cities and actively taking steps across all community sectors to make their neighborhoods good places for all residents to live, work, grow up, and grow old.

All communities are experiencing the effects of crucial *change drivers* that have come together to make the livable communities movement important and timely. For example, major demographic trends are transforming the make-up and character of our neighborhood populations; volatile economic fluctuations are affecting family and community vitality; and increased knowledge of the effect of environmental factors on the health and well-being of community residents is spurring a growing focus on sustainability and smart growth. This increasing interest in community *livability* reflects the significant impact of these changes and the desire to maintain a good quality of life for all residents as population profiles and circumstances evolve over time.

LIVABILITY

Just what constitutes a livable community is defined differently by different professional affinity groups, but ultimately focuses on both tangible and intangible aspects that affect the quality of life of individual residents and of the community as a whole:

Tangible aspects: Many quality-of-life aspects are tangible features; for example, the livable communities movement underlies a growing call to:

- Create choices in housing alternatives;
- Incorporate the principles of universal design into homes, buildings, and public facilities to accommodate the varied physical sizes and abilities typically seen among residents in every household and in every neighborhood;
- Make communities "walkable" and homes "visitable";
- Include easy access to green space (parks; open space) in neighborhoods;
- Develop innovative, accessible, affordable mobility and transportation models;
- Make homes and communities sustainable—that is, make energy usage more efficient and affordable, and emphasize the greening of homes, buildings, public facilities, and the environment;
- Provide sufficient and accessible amenities in public spaces, such as benches, lighting, streetscapes, signage, etc.;
- Capitalize on the benefits of technology in health care and housing;
- Coordinate access to sufficient, affordable, appropriate health, social, and supportive services; and
- Maximize the advantages of inclusive planning and innovative land-use and zoning strategies and tools that promote smart growth, smart building, and sustainability.

Intangible aspects: In addition, the movement also underlies the increasing attention on intangible elements that have a remarkable influence on the quality of our living environments. For example:

- **Sense of community:** Leaders and residents are examining the extent to which community members (residents and business owners) feel there is a "sense of community"; that is, members say there is a community identity, social cohesiveness, and a shared feeling of belonging; members feel a shared sense of interconnectedness among residents and among business owners, of relating to each other on a variety of levels; members believe that they matter to one another, believe that their opinions have value and are counted, and believe that members' needs will be met through a commitment to act together as a community.
- **Social capital:** Leaders and residents are searching for effective ways to build upon their community's social capital; that is, how to support intergenerational-interdependence, how to promote engagement and communication among their community's various population groups, and how to capitalize on the creativity, skills, and opportunities inherent in involving all age groups, all household types, and all cultural and ethnic groups in defining and resolving crucial community issues.
- **Community empowerment:** Leaders and residents are seeking avenues to strengthen community empowerment; that is, how to promote the ability and stimulate the desire of residents to actively engage in community planning and decision-making.

Common threads: Various disciplines (such as architecture, aging, planning, demography, energy, advocacy, disabilities, development, and others) have adopted livable community guidelines, each often concentrating on aspects germane to their own specific areas of expertise. However, several common themes weave through all these guidelines:

- **Local decision-making:** Decisions about the various livable community elements should reside at the local level.
- **Interwoven, universal impact:** The impact of decisions, regardless of which discipline, has an impact on *all* residents, including children, adults, older individuals, persons with disabilities, families, caregivers, and people from varying social, cultural, and economic backgrounds.
- **Cumulative impact:** Decisions affecting the well-being of individual citizens create a cumulative effect on the health, social, and economic well-being of the overall community as a cohesive entity.

Community tools: The livable community movement has spawned the development of practical tools and approaches to help local leaders and residents take steps to increase the livability of their villages, towns, and cities. To expand perspectives and maximize creative solutions, such tools focus on using community-wide, inclusive, cross-sector, cross-age strategies: to conduct community assessments or evaluations; to understand the cross-sector common impact of a community issue; to identify and define a problem and tackle its resolution; and to organize community-level planning and action steps.

Links to 30 of these tools and approaches are included in the *Livable New York Resource Manual's* section entitled, "TOOLS and GUIDING PRINCIPLES—for inclusive planning; for building sustainable community coalitions; for community evaluation, capacity-building, and decision-making; and for creating livable communities"; and links to 13 additional tools and approaches are included in the *Manual's* section entitled, "COMMUNITY-DEVELOPMENT TOOL KITS: economic, sustainability, and smart growth."

