

Summit: Planning has to hit all bases

By Krystal Knapp
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PRINCETON BOROUGH — A holistic, statewide planning strategy is needed to boost the economy, create a more sustainable environment and reduce segregation and the concentration of poverty in New Jersey, say local, state and federal officials and planning experts.

“Sprawl is dead, based on market conditions,” said Timothy Touhey, executive vice president of the New Jersey Builders Association and former chairman of the New Jersey State Planning Commission. “We’ve gotten to a place where we have to be able to house first-time homebuyers and work force in order to survive.”

“The world has changed dramatically since 2007 in terms of how we access capital and financing,” said Touhey. “For New Jersey to get things right, we need a strong, solidified state plan that has to line up with where New Jersey wants to go. I don’t think it’s fair to put families in places with no public transportation and tell them to fend for themselves. It’s the wrong strategy. Housing needs to be part of the economic development engine and you need to house the work force.”

Touhey was addressing the more than 370 clergy, non-profit and community leaders, planners and local officials who attended the recent conference “Building ONE New Jersey: State Planning for Inclusion, Sustainability and Growth.” It was held at Princeton University and hosted by PlanSmart NJ and the New Jersey Regional Coalition.

The theme that was repeated often throughout the day was the need for an integrated approach to planning in which housing, transportation, health and environmental agencies coordinate efforts.

PlanSmart NJ President Dianne Brake opened the conference by laying out a four-step approach for creating a strong state plan.

The first step: Pursue an aggressive economic development strategy that targets jobs that would strengthen the economic base of each region in the state. The second step: Create affordable housing programs that would meet the needs of the work force. The third step: Locate jobs in places that would shift travel to public transit, improve natural resources and reduce the concentration of poverty. The fourth step: Create regional compact agreements among various government entities to implement the plan in each county.

Brake said that such a plan, creating a single, shared vision of the future of New Jersey would be more efficient and effective than the current fragmented system in which different agencies of government have conflicting rules and local governments compete with each other for taxable development.

New Jersey Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno spoke about the need for a new, more streamlined state plan and announced the decision to move the Office of Smart Growth to her office, renaming it the Office of Planning Advocacy.

Ron Sims, Deputy Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, challenged the audience to work to change federal and state regulations and local planning and zoning to produce a better quality of life for all Americans.

“We need to do so in order for the next generation to compete in the global marketplace,” Sims said. “That is what is at stake.”