



N.J. group champions efficient land-use planning

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ATLANTIC CITY - Everyone nowadays likes smart growth, or land-use planning that focuses on preventing urban sprawl.

Residing in the most densely populated state pushes us to find ways we could better organize land use and development.

Back in 1968, as the environmental movement was just taking hold, no one gave smart growth a thought - except maybe a nonprofit organization started that year in Princeton to make planning more effective in New Jersey's three central counties.

Ten years ago, the group realized that with many smart-growth issues being decided at the state level, it needed to work statewide and PlanSmart NJ was born.

With four decades of land-use planning experience, PlanSmart NJ has learned that sound development cannot occur in pieces.

Dianne Brake, president of PlanSmart NJ, said Thursday that issues such as transportation, economic development, environmental preservation and quality of life are all intertwined.

And even though most land-use decisions are made at the local level, the problems must be addressed and the goals reached on a regional level or higher.

"We're focused on statewide and regional approaches to issues," Brake said. "We have to provide a framework for local governments to make decisions that improve conditions across the board."

So PlanSmart NJ's mission is to transform the process of planning, to ensure that local decisions work in the larger context.

As an example, she pointed to the widespread desire of municipalities now to become transportation hubs, and the belief in what's called Transit Oriented Development. But merely preparing a town for transit will not make it magically appear, she said - it must be planned for all the way up to the state level.

"Unless centers promote the economy and remove disparities between communities and protect ecosystems, they might be well-designed but they're just rearranging the deck chairs," Brake said.

PlanSmart NJ also encourages good planning practices by finding and honoring examples of it in the state each year.

Toward the end of October, it will present annual awards for planning efficiency, equity, economy and environment to institutions across the state.

One will be given to the Atlantic City Convention & Visitors Authority, which will be honored for its efficient use of energy, in particular its now-famous solar collector (the biggest single-roof array in the United States). The ACCVA is in the process of adding a wind turbine to reduce its energy use further.

Brake said the region is a leader in renewable energy, noting that the Atlantic County Utilities Authority was honored last year.

Another award recipient this year in southern New Jersey is less well-known: the Rutgers Food Innovation Center in Bridgeton.

PlanSmart NJ will give the center its Economic Development Achievement Award for its efforts to preserve and expand the state's food and agricultural sector.

The food center - one of 10 USDA-certified Agricultural Innovation Center Demonstration Programs in the nation - already has helped more than 1,000 companies create new food products.

By 2012, its client companies are projected to create 1,000 new jobs and bring in \$200 million in new revenue.

"And they've located in the heart of the farmland region, in an area in need of economic development," Brake said. "It's a good idea, and it has been very successful."

By such steps are the future of the state and its residents assured.

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