



Inside Job

*How the Obama Administration
is Reshaping Urban Policy*

Story by **BEN ADLER**
Illustration by **ELEANOR GROSCH**

ISSUE
003

FOREFRONT



VOLUME 1, ISSUE 3.
© 2012 NEXT AMERICAN CITY

Forefront is published weekly by Next American City, a 501c3 nonprofit that connects cities and the people working to improve them.

Next American City.
2816 West Girard Ave.
Philadelphia, PA 19130

.....

For subscriptions, please visit
www.americancity.org/subscribe.

While Next American City welcomes the submission of unsolicited work, we unfortunately may not be able to respond to each submission individually.

Please send work to ariella@americancity.org.

For additional information, please visit www.americancity.org.

Rural bias has been so endemic to recent presidential politics that many of us didn't realize there was an alternative. Between 1980 and 2008, the United States had 20 nonconsecutive years of Republican presidential rule that shaped much of the country's development, coddling small towns, suburbs and exurbs at the expense of a region's urban core.

As *The New York Observer* **recently noted**, “Much of the plight of urban policy started with Ronald Reagan. He was the first Republican president to take the White House without winning a single urban area during his 1980 run, and thus the GOP realized it no longer needed to cater to urban voters.” The last Democratic president, Bill Clinton, hailed from Arkansas, a state whose most important metropolis, Little Rock, is the 118th largest city in the U.S.

Barack Obama's campaign for president was a tremendously exciting opportunity for urbanists. A former urban community organizer, Obama settled in Chicago. While serving in the Illinois State Senate and the U.S. Senate, he represented the city and built a circle of advisers from local power players like David Axelrod and Valerie Jarrett. He campaigned with the Conference of Mayors **saying**, “You need a partner in the White House.... You shouldn't be succeeding despite Washington; you should be succeeding with a hand from Washington. Neglect is not a policy for America's metropolitan areas.”

“Obama came to power having made some significant yet modest promises,” says Scott Bernstein, president of the Chicago-based Center for Neighborhood Technology, a think tank promoting urban sustainability. “He paid attention to cities during the campaign. There was a division of the transition committee focused on cities. It's been a really long time since the federal government had anything resembling an urban policy. The last real try at it was in the Carter administration.”

Unlike his predecessors in the White House, Obama seemed to understand that cities are the economic and cultural engine of the United States and need special policies to achieve their maximum potential.

Early in his tenure, Obama made good on his promise to focus on metropolitan concerns. He created a new White House Office of Urban Affairs in February 2009, which was **hailed by urban advocates** as a sign that cities would finally get the attention they deserve. He appointed Shaun Donovan, New York City's highly regarded Commissioner of Housing, Preservation and Development, as Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). And while the unlikely appointment of Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood, a Republican congressman from rural Illinois with no known interest in transportation or land use planning issues, seemed like a political maneuver (a member of Obama's transition



team confirmed to me at the time that LaHood was chosen because “We needed a Republican”), advocates for smart growth and mass transit were quickly and pleasantly surprised to find LaHood an ally.

LaHood’s appointment may have been a first clue to President Obama’s shrewd strategy to governing. “Reform is an inside game and an outside game,” notes Xavier Briggs, an urban planning professor at M.I.T. who served until recently as associate director of Obama’s Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

While Obama’s campaign was portrayed as an outside game, once in the White House, Obama’s approach to policy making has been almost entirely an inside game. He lets Congress take the lead in writing legislation rather than putting out proposals that will turn into giant targets, as Bill Clinton’s unsuccessful health care reform bill did. He filled his administration with centrist congressional insiders, such as former House Democratic Caucus Chair Rahm Emanuel and congressional liaison Jim Messina, a former staffer to Senate Finance Chair Max Baucus (D-MT). When writing legislation, Obama attempts to buy off potential opponents — such as the pharmaceutical industry in the Affordable Care Act — rather than confront them and risk defeat.

In keeping with these tactics, the administration has tackled urban policy reform with a series of behind-the-scenes initiatives rather than with flashy public reforms. It has focused on integrating cabinet departments and encouraging collaboration among them — the kind of work that tickles policy wonks. The Domestic Policy Council (DPC), led by Derek Douglas, in coordination with the Office of Urban Affairs and

key players in other offices such as Briggs in OMB, has created inter-agency initiatives that are transforming federal urban policy.

The White House Office of Urban Affairs listening tour in 2009 surfaced numerous local innovations that the federal government has sought to mimic nationally. For example, the Office's Director Adolfo Carrion and Douglas of the DPC went to Philadelphia to learn about Pennsylvania's Fresh Food Financing Initiative, which helps healthy food stores open in underserved urban areas. That inspired the federal Healthy Food Financing Initiative, a joint venture between the departments of Treasury, Agriculture and Health and Human Services. Their visit to East Lake, a distressed neighborhood in Atlanta that is rebounding with a comprehensive redevelopment plan, helped provide the template for a program launched in 2010 called the **Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative**.

The structure of grant making has radically changed. Instead of doling out fistfuls of cash to states through block grants and formula funding, departments such as DOT are administering competitive grant programs based on achieving goals. The highest-profile instance has been **Race to the Top**, Obama's education reform initiative. But other agencies have taken the same approach. For example, DOT's TIGER grants reward multimodal projects by setting transportation goals that include environmental and affordability priorities.

The overarching theme of all these programs is integration at every level of government and helping communities shape their own fate. Historically, problems and federal attempts at solutions have been treated separately. Nowhere is this more apparent than in cities, which demand integrated approaches to housing, transportation, criminal justice, education and environmental remediation. In the past, a community needing federal resources for development would have to address HUD to build public housing, the DOT to build roads and transit systems, and the Environmental Protection Agency to help with urban brownfields. Sometimes these projects would overlap, other times they'd conflict. The end result? Inefficiencies that simply can't be afforded in today's fiscally constrained times.

What the Obama team realized is that cities need policies that encourage holistic improvement. Every Obama administration initiative is thus focused on using inter-agency coordination to aid cities in pursuing their own goals, rather than offering one-size-fits-all funds or operations. To push the country towards more environmentally sustainable and equitable cities, the administration developed the **Partnership for Sustainable Communities**. Created to coordinate the workings of three agencies — HUD, DOT and the EPA — the Partnership is the cornerstone of the administration's urban work.

There are two primary components to the administration's work: The Partnership for Sustainable Communities, which coordinates the sustainability agenda across agencies, and the Sustainable Communities Initiative, a program within HUD. The Partnership for Sustainable Communities involves weekly meetings between top officials at the three agencies to coordinate their efforts. For example, officials at HUD can review applications to DOT's competitive TIGER grant program to help assess how well such programs will link affordable housing to affordable transportation. The Sustainable Communities Initiative awards competitive grants for planning and implementation of smart growth plans. Recipients range from small cities to entire metropolitan regions, and the projects can be anything from reviving a downtown shopping district to building affordable housing along emerging mass transit corridors.

“A lot of folks may not have appreciated how extraordinary it actually is for cabinet departments to sign up to talk to each other...”

4

The Partnership draws rave reviews from advocates and practitioners across the country for its healthy goals and sensible approach to achieving them. In a sharp departure from the usual nay-saying that accompanies federal policymaking, it's tough to get anyone to criticize the Obama administration's signature urban program.

“A lot of folks may not have appreciated how extraordinary it actually is for cabinet departments to sign up to talk to each other,” says Sarah Kline, policy director at Reconnecting America. “The fact that they ran a joint grant program and reviewed each others programs is a sea change.”

And the coordination between federal agencies is already changing the way state and local governments work together. “Before the Obama administration there was no incentive for, say, the [Metropolitan Transit Authority] to work with the city of Stamford, Connecticut, much less across state lines,” says Chris Jones, vice-president for research at the Regional Planning Association (RPA) in New York City. Now, the RPA and a consortium of 17 governments and agencies in New York and Connecticut are working together to improve transit-oriented development in the New York metro region. The carrot leading to the collaboration? A \$3.5 million shared planning grant from HUD through the Sustainable Communities Initiative.

Unfortunately, there won't be more grants like the RPA's. While the Partnership still exists, and its principles still animate the work in the member agencies, the new Republican Congress eliminated funding last year for the HUD grants. With the anti-government zealotry that now dominates the House of Representatives, the administration will severely limited in what it can accomplish going forward. If a major initiative didn't take flight during Obama's first two years, it never will.

SHARED INVESTMENT

Fordham Station in The Bronx is one of the most used stations on Metro-North, the authority that runs commuter rail lines to New York City's northern suburbs. It sits at the junction of two major commercial thoroughfares, Fordham Road and 3rd Avenue, in an area that was characterized by low-density urban streetscapes. The station caters to students from Fordham University — the large Jesuit institution's wrought iron gate sits right next to the main station entrance — and white-collar professionals working in the two mid-rise office towers across Fordham Road. In Fordham Plaza, an otherwise underwhelming patch of concrete between the two buildings, vendors sell food and makeshift stands hawk clothes, fruit and tchotchkes.

With the planning grant, the RPA and a consortium of agencies are studying stations like this one to figure out how to maximize the opportunities for affordable, efficient housing close to transportation offered by the New York City area's extensive mass transit network. The purpose of the study is to build on what already works. How, for example, can the public sector induce developers to buy parcels with low-density buildings and redevelop them into taller, mixed-use structures with housing or office space above ground-floor retail? The city rezoned the area last year to allow taller buildings and more commercial development, but "if you zone it they will come" is not always sufficient in urban planning. New York City Department of City Planning (DCP) officials say further steps, from a marketing campaign to improvements in pedestrian crossings at busy intersections, and plans for financing assistance may be necessary. Even the seemingly vibrant commercial strip of Fordham Road could be maximized, according to DCP, by adding offices or housing above the stores.

Two stops down the Harlem train line towards Manhattan, the Melrose station is an altogether different story. The train tracks serve to separate the neighborhood into two halves: To the west a solidly residential enclave, to the east a warren of abandoned lots, industrial wasteland and housing projects. The station is practically hidden beneath the street and it sits unappealingly next to a pile of apparently abandoned cars and unused property. A 2007 study found that a mere 19 passengers per day go

into Manhattan from here. “Half the people in the neighborhood may not even know the station is here,” says Shawn Brede, a city planner in DCP’s Bronx office.

The area around the station is ripe for development of affordable housing. There are 244 vacant lots comprising 1 million square feet of empty space within a half-mile radius of the station. But first the city has to figure out why the station is so under-utilized. There are over 1,800 people living in housing projects built over the train tracks next to the station, and several thousand more within a few blocks, so it’s not for lack of population.



City Planning is sending out canvassers and holding town halls to find out what area residents want in terms of transportation. For example, they often interview people who live closer to a different Metro North station but say they use the Fordham station. Why is that? Because it is better served by bus lines? Because it feels safer? Because it’s closer to shopping? From that information, they can try to figure out how to make other stations more appealing, and thus create nodes of economic activity. In Melrose, they will likely recommend turning a forlorn little park next to the station into an entrance, with better lighting and visibility from major streets and safer pedestrian crossings.

While the Partnership is billed as a win for major cities, the importance of inter-governmental cooperation may be greater in the suburbs than in a major city itself. Hop on the Metro-North for eight minutes from the Fordham station northbound to Mount Vernon and you can see why. Mount Vernon is a predominately black community of more than 67,000 immediately north of the Bronx, in Westchester County. If you exit the Mount Vernon East stop on the train, just 29 minutes from Grand Central, you will hardly feel as if you are in a bustling metropolis. Across the street from the station are a row of one- and two-story buildings with garages, mostly

anonymous or advertising auto- and machine-repair businesses. As you step a few blocks past the station you enter downtown Mount Vernon, a somewhat dense area with a healthy mix of residential and commercial development. Clearly, though, there could be more housing that takes advantage of the transit access and provides the town with a more welcoming first impression.

This past February, on a cold evening, the RPA attempted to bring together the community to discuss a regional plan. The nominal purpose of such meetings, which are being held all over the metro area, is to glean what residents want to see in their communities. In practice it seemed as if government officials were talking to themselves. The schedule called for presentations from three mayors of adjacent lower Westchester cities — Mount Vernon, Yonkers and New Rochelle, although Yonkers Mayor Mike Spano sent an emissary — and audience feedback. The room was at most one-third full with roughly 30 people. Most appeared to be some sort of employee of one of the cities, and most were white. (The three cities combined are roughly half white). It sounded faintly absurd when Mount Vernon's Planning Commissioner William Long thanked “the residents of the three cities” for coming out to share their thoughts.

Even so, the larger project of bringing the governments of three cities in Westchester together to plan their collective future is not the exercise in futility that participatory democracy so often seems to be. Whereas similar areas in New York City all fall under one political umbrella, historically the suburbs' patchwork of townships, villages, smaller cities and counties have often worked separately, even at cross-purposes. As New Rochelle Mayor Noam Bramson explained that evening, these satellite cities have a shared future. They are all benefiting from the downtown revival that is sweeping the country.

But the factors that prevent them from realizing their full potential are often beyond their control. “The remaining challenges lend themselves to coordinated action,” said Bramson. For example, mass transit links in all three cities are excellent going south (to New York City) or north along train lines. But east to west access is very poor. To build faster, more useful bus service between New Rochelle and Yonkers, with Mount Vernon in the middle, will require a joint effort.

The Partnership's inter-agency coordination will be a boon to communities like these. The New York City Department of Transportation received a \$10 million TIGER grant from the federal DOT for improvements to the plaza above the Fordham station. Just as that can work in concert with the Sustainable Communities grant, the city may apply for HUD funds for its affordable housing plans in Melrose through HUD's other



programs. Having demonstrated already how they intend to knit this housing to mass transit could help them win the grant and most importantly, help ensure federal housing dollars are supporting the transit-accessible projects necessary for a denser, less car-dependent future.

This coordinated approach is gaining ground in several other cities. The South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association, representing 42 moderate-income suburbs in industrial areas in south Cook County near Chicago, received a grant to develop strategies to support reuse of old rail yards.

“They’re saying, ‘Let’s make rail yards work better for operators and businesses that depend on them: get truck traffic out of communal spaces, allow redevelopment of downtown areas, create more jobs, make

people able to afford more housing,” says Bernstein of the Center for Neighborhood Technology. “The grant has allowed them to come together as an integrated institution and lower the cost of pre-development so it can happen faster.” Specifically, the suburban towns and cities are developing plans to move rail yards, via land swaps, in ways that will reconnect their downtowns and expand the amount of transit-accessible land where they can build affordable housing.

“This is the kind of thinking that’s been missing,” says Bernstein. “We say we have a ‘region’ but then revert to looking at one station, bus line or subway line at a time. You can’t attribute all regional thinking to the Sustainable Communities program, but the uptick in activity wouldn’t have happened without the Obama administration and the Partnership.”

IMPASSE

You might expect the Partnership for Sustainable Communities to receive bipartisan support in Congress. Its approach, with grants of a few million dollars apiece,

is moderate, if not quite conservative. The White House's entire request for the Sustainable Communities Initiative for 2011 was \$150 million. The underlying idea is to harness the magic of competition and empower local jurisdictions rather than dictating to them. It is also designed to foster private investment rather than relying on a cash tap from Washington.

"Implementation funding can come from private sources," says Alex Dodds, a spokesperson for Smart Growth America. "Once a town has a plan in place it's much easier to get the business community excited because they see how it will happen. A small amount of money can help a town gather investment from the business community that's much more than the small amount from the federal government."

But the first budget passed by Congress after Republicans took control of the House of Representatives eliminated funding for grants through the Sustainable Communities Initiative. The Partnership will still exist, as will the Sustainable Communities office within HUD. That means localities that have already received a grant will continue to receive oversight and assistance, and the animating principles can still infuse the work of the three agencies. But there will not be any more grants awarded for local projects unless Congress renews the funding in a future budget. Congressional Republicans even suggested rules preventing the agencies from reviewing each other's grant applications. Why did they cut funding for the program and even try to stymie inter-agency coordination? To liberals and urbanists, helping communities plan their futures and making government more effective are self-evidently good goals. Being against them sounds like being against mom and apple pie.

Some of the answer is simple ignorance. Republicans, especially the 87 freshmen elected in 2010's Tea Party wave, mostly do not represent urban districts. To them, cities are foreign lands in which they have little interest. Combine that perspective with a strong presupposition that any federal domestic program is at best wasteful and at worst a fiendish attempt to impose cosmopolitan values on an unsuspecting nation, and the obvious response to any program for cities is to cut it.

As for actually attempting to undermine inter-agency coordination, Tea Party Republicans view every government program as inherently worse as it gets higher up the chain of federalism. If decisions are better made by states than by the feds, then they are better made by agencies than by inter-agency panels. The more effective the government is at coordinating between agencies, the more power it will have to turn America into a fatter version of France.

For another example of this philosophy in action, read *The New York Times'* [recent front-page report](#) on Tea Party activists badgering their local elected officials

to drop plans to improve energy efficiency or build bike paths. (There is a widespread belief on the right — supported by figures such as Newt Gingrich and codified by a plank in the Republican National Committee’s platform — that such measures are an implementation of the United Nation’s “Agenda 21,” a non-binding 1992 resolution encouraging conservation of natural land and resources.)

The irony is that Republicans oppose the Sustainable Communities initiative and inter-agency coordination because they don’t want the federal government to dictate to localities, but the whole purpose of the program is empowering communities to do what they want. Everyone who worked on the program, from the White House to the agencies, emphasizes that it’s not their role to tell communities what they should look like.

And that is the Obama administration’s biggest failing on urban and metropolitan planning policy: Nudging localities in the right direction would be a good thing. The federal government has encouraged and subsidized suburban sprawl and auto-dependence for decades through a variety of policies. A progressive agenda for cities and suburbs would mean affirmatively turning that battleship around.

But the Obama administration and outside observers — even those who are generally fans of the administration’s urban policy — say that is simply not the administration’s goal. “I don’t think reducing auto dependence has been the administration’s top transportation priority, or that it’s seen as a consensus goal in the U.S.,” says Petra Todorovich, national policy director at the Regional Plan Association and director of America 2050, a national coalition working on how to accommodate future population growth. “If [Obama] framed [his policies] that way, he’d get a lot of pushback from people saying ‘You’re trying to take away my car.’”

“We have for the last 50 years created a very sophisticated set of policies and programs that incent a particular type of development,” acknowledges Shelley Poticha, who leads the Sustainable Communities Initiative within HUD. “I think there’s increasing recognition, particularly based on demographic trends and market trends, that we need to level the playing field for more types of development. That’s a huge agenda.” And it’s one the administration mostly has not adopted.

Such an agenda would focus on removing favoritism for suburban sprawl in the tax code and transportation policy. Tax reform — such as eliminating or limiting tax deductions for home mortgage interest payments — is something Obama has discussed as part of a larger deficit reduction package. The impasse between the two parties on fiscal policy is much larger than any question of land use or development policy. So it would be unfair to allocate too much blame to Obama for the status quo.

But on transportation policy Obama has had more opportunities to move the



needle. And while he has shown some good instincts, his commitment has been mixed. Obama has drawn wide praise for his support for expanding inter-city high-speed rail. That's a good policy, but it's not a substitute for a real transportation program.

One of the ways the federal government favors cars is through the Surface Transportation law, which uses federal gasoline taxes to fund highway and mass transit construction projects. Currently most of the money is allocated through formulas, of which the lion's share goes to highways.

As Americans shift away from driving, or toward using more fuel-efficient cars, they are consuming less gasoline. The result is that gasoline tax revenues are declining. The

gasoline tax hasn't been raised since 1993, so it's not even keeping pace with inflation. We are left with crumbling infrastructure and an accumulating backlog of worthy but unfunded projects. The Surface Transportation law is overdue for re-authorization because no one has figured out how to pay for it.

In 2010 Obama laid out a proposal that would do many good things but would require twice as much money as the gas tax currently brings in. (Although Ryan Lizza [reported in *The New Yorker*](#) that in 2009 Obama rejected former Rep. Jim Oberstar's (D-MN) request for \$115 billion in additional funding for Surface Transportation.) But Obama simply refused to say how he would like to pay for it. Every time a rumor appeared in the press that the White House wanted to raise transportation funding one way or another — a gasoline tax [one day](#), a vehicle miles traveled fee [the next](#) — the White House would shoot it down.

So what happened? Nothing. Congress and the White House were consumed with higher priorities such as health care reform. No bill ever moved to the floor of the full House or Senate. The opportunity to get a good transportation law was completely blown. The current House Republican majority has proposed a Surface Transportation Re-authorization that does little besides aggregate their wish list of anti-environment gestures. It would, [as Greg Hanscom writes](#) in *Grist*, “cut all designated funding for bike and pedestrian infrastructure, the Safe Routes to School program, and grants that have encouraged ‘complete streets’ projects.” In addition, House Speaker John Boehner “proposed killing a longstanding rule that sets aside a portion of the gas tax to fund trains and buses and other public transportation systems.”

In February, as part of his proposed 2013 budget, Obama offered a positive vision of a Surface Transportation re-authorization. He would pay for the six year \$476 billion bill by investing savings from the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan. The proposal — which would more than double funding for mass transit — drew strong praise from transit advocates. “This proposal demonstrates that the Administration understands the important role public transportation plays in getting people to work and putting people to work,” said American Public Transportation Association President Michael Melaniphy [in a statement](#). “It includes a continuing commitment to high-speed and intercity passenger rail, improvements to keep our systems in a state of good repair, and a focus on livable communities.”

DOA URBANISM

It's too bad that Obama waited until the fourth year of his administration to finally suggest a way of paying for mass transit. Don't assume that he needed to wait for

.....
"I don't think reducing auto dependence has been the administration's top transportation priority, or that it's seen as a consensus goal in the U.S.."
.....

withdrawal from Iraq to find the money. It's an accounting fiction to say Obama just found a new revenue stream. Those savings could simply go to deficit reduction. Obama is saying he wants to use general revenues to cover shortfalls in the highway trust fund. That's fine, but why didn't he just suggest that in 2009? To many, it appeared as though he were waiting until Republicans dominated Congress, rendering this gesture purely symbolic. It is widely understood to be dead on arrival, like everything else in Obama's budget that involved investing in America's future.

Other positive proposals in Obama's budget, such as restoring funding for the Sustainable Communities Initiative, may be equally unlikely to pass, although in that case the significantly

lower cost makes it less out of reach. While urban advocates are generally pleased by Obama's budget proposals, the National Low Income Housing Coalition **criticized the president's budget** for reducing spending on Project-Based Rental Assistance, where the administration proposes to provide less than a full 12 months of funding to some of the public housing agencies that administer the grants.

What will happen to urban policy without the Sustainable Communities grants? The Obama administration has begun to create a series of other programs that operate on many of the same principles as Sustainable Communities. The other major umbrella for various programs is the Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative (NRI), a White House-led collaboration between HUD and the Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Treasury and Justice. The purpose is to address the various challenges of impoverished neighborhoods holistically, rather than through different silos addressed by those respective agencies. Bad schools, high crime and lack of access to capital are not entirely separate problems, so the government cannot treat them as if they were. "In high-poverty neighborhoods, high unemployment rates, rampant crime, health disparities, inadequate early care and education, and struggling schools contribute to intensify the negative outcomes associated with living in poverty," explains the **White House's program description**.

Out of the revitalization initiative, the administration has created several grant-making programs such as Choice Neighborhoods, an outgrowth of HOPE VI. During



the Clinton administration, liberals famously came to terms with the fact that building massive public housing projects had, by concentrating poverty, often worsened rather than alleviated social ills. HOPE VI focused on dispersing public housing. Choice Neighborhoods, run by HUD, takes it a step further. Merely putting poor people in lower-rise buildings doesn't make their neighborhoods livable. Choice gives out planning and implementation grants to cities to conceive and develop healthy neighborhoods. That can mean actual renovations to public housing, or work on the surrounding streets such as integrating housing into the street life, fixing sidewalks, planting trees, building bus shelters or filling in vacant properties and empty lots.

14

Some very small programs with similar models have been launched in other agencies. In 2010, the Education Department's \$10 million Promise Neighborhoods program gave grants of up to \$500,000 to 21 non-profits trying to mimic the famous Harlem Children's Zone. An additional 20 received grants in 2011. They will develop a system of comprehensive social, academic and health supports meant to bolster long term educational ambitions and outcomes for disadvantaged children.

The newest federal urban program — which, being launched since Republicans took control of Congress, is fortunately an administrative endeavor not requiring congressional authorization or appropriations — is “**Strong Cities, Strong Communities**,” which White House staffers call “SC2” for short. It grew out of insights gained from the cities tour that Carrion, Douglas and others took in 2009. Launched last summer, the goal is to build capacity in local governments. Administration officials learned from their 2009 cities tour about the need to strengthen governmental capacity at the local level because budget cuts had forced cities to eliminate economic development departments or left them thinly staffed.

The strong cities initiative was designed to build that local capacity in three ways: Develop a comprehensive strategy for economic revitalization, work with anchor

institutions such as hospitals, charities and state and local government agencies, and embed federal employees directly in city halls, to work with the local partners. The first six cities — Cleveland, Detroit, Memphis, New Orleans, Chester, Pa. and Fresno, Ca. — were selected and received teams of federal officials last fall. Although the principles of integration and coordination are the same as Sustainable Communities, SC2 is not focused solely on land use. In some cases, such as Fresno, where the goal is downtown revitalization and the EPA is the lead agency, the program is quite similar. But in Detroit the focus is on public safety and the federal team lead hails from the Department of Justice.

If the Obama administration is going to make any further progress on urban issues, SC2 will have to be the model, because congressional funding will be non-existent. (It will also have to hire some new blood. Douglas recently left DPC for the University of Chicago. Carrion became a regional HUD administrator in 2010 and neither he nor Douglas has yet been replaced.)

In light of that, we already know what Obama's legacy generally will be in urban policy. Much like Clinton, he will be able to claim credit for some modest improvements. Clinton had HOPE VI, the 1994 crime bill and welfare reform. Obama will have the Partnership for Sustainable Communities and the Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative. But in scale they are nothing like the War on Poverty or the Great Society. For those of us who think suburban sprawl is a pox on American society, the Obama presidency will be — like Clinton's — another missed opportunity. »

15



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ben Adler reports on national politics and media for *The Nation* as a contributing writer. He previously covered national politics and policy as a staffer at *Newsweek*, *Politico* and the Center for American Progress.

Ben also writes regularly about urban and environmental politics and policy. He was a 2008-2009 urban leaders fellow at *Next American City*. His freelance writing has appeared in *The American Prospect*, *Architect*, *Architectural Record*, *The Atlantic*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, *Good*, *Grist*, *The Guardian*, *The New Republic*, *New York*, *The Progressive*, *Reuters*, *Salon* and *The Washington Monthly* and has been reprinted in several books.

He grew up in Brooklyn, NY and graduated from Wesleyan University. You can follow Ben at twitter.com/badler.

16



ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Eleanor Grosch loves animals; you name it, she's probably drawn it! Eleanor's unique graphic perspective aims to simplify line and playfully arrange form to capture the essence of each animal she draws. She's well-known for her graphic take on our feathered, furry, and fuzzy friends, and her illustration career has grown from its rock poster roots with jobs for clients such as Keds, Giro, Urban Outfitters, and Wilco.