WHY PLACE MATTERS
for Federal Grant Seekers
Why does place matter? Simply put, places matter because they – towns, neighborhoods, villages, and regions - are the locations where we live, work, raise our families, and gain a sense of community. Places are spaces filled with cultural and personal meaning. Through natural topography, landmarks, geographic boundaries, and the unique histories and architecture of the built environment, places provide identity and meaning for people and communities. A sense of community develops through the connections people feel to places and the relationships they build there. There has been much recent discussion among policy makers, funders and practitioners about the importance of place and place-based initiatives. Why all of this sudden attention?

Joel Kotkin (2010) argues that cultivating a sense of community and belonging through social networks and new technologies will be a key factor in sustaining the viability of places in the future. He describes the growing importance of place as America’s population grows by 100 million people over the next forty years resulting in America becoming a more competitive, crowded, and complex place in which to live (Kotkin, 2010). This is part of what he calls “the new localism.” Driven in part by the recent economic downturn, changes in demographics, rising energy costs, and new technologies, Kotkin (2008) argues that Americans are strengthening family and community ties, staying closer to home, and focusing more on the places they live. The basic premise of the new localism is that “the longer people stay in their homes and communities, the more they identify with and care for those places” (Kotkin, 2008).

In “Native to Nowhere” Beatley (2004) argues that people need “particular and unique places” where they can come together, connect, and share in order to lead healthy and meaningful lives. He cites several studies that demonstrate the positive impact of relationships, social networks, and community connectedness on
the health and well-being of people. He argues that places facilitate the development of social networks and participation by providing “the spaces, reasons and opportunities to come together” (Beatley, 2004, pg.5) such as walking, bicycling, and attending public events like city council meetings, festivals, and parades. Beatley (2004) and Williamson et al. (2003) argue that strengthening social networks builds and reinforces a commitment to place and creates more democratic communities.

Strategies that focus on the individual, sometimes referred to as “people-based” strategies, target individual need and personal circumstances such as income level, educational attainment, and job skills. Individual interventions include examples such as Earned Income Tax Credits, Social Security, housing vouchers, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. These strategies provide assistance regardless of the geographic location of the beneficiary and are also vitally important in improving a person’s well-being. We know, however, that we need high-paying jobs and affordable housing located within close proximity to each other if we want to improve individual income levels. In addition, we also know that if we want children to achieve higher educational outcomes they need better schools in their neighborhoods (Choi, 2010). To truly revitalize and strengthen our communities we need both individual interventions and place-based strategies. In this way, people and places are intricately linked and deeply influenced by each other.

Places provide the context that shapes many of today’s public policy conflicts. These challenges are multifaceted and interconnected. Bradford (2005) describes these challenges as “wicked problems” that are complex, cross-sectoral, and resistant to solutions that primarily address one policy area. These problems need to be engaged by a variety of actors at the local, state, and federal levels who can create integrated solutions and linkages among the issues. The perspective of place provides the vehicle to address these problems comprehensively with strategies that are designed with
knowledge specific to local circumstances and conditions, and delivered through collaborations that cross policy silos.

Place-based initiatives are heralded by academics and practitioners for the benefits they produce in communities, including enhancing environmental sustainability, stabilizing the economic base and producing multiplier effects, as well as improving civic involvement, health, and social connectedness. Place-based initiatives focus on democratic processes, engaging residents and community organizations, participatory planning processes, collaboration, and capacity building as essential components of their approach to community building (Greenberg et al., 2010, Hellwig, 2002, Chaskin et al., 2000, Miller and Burns, 2006, and Kubisch et al., 2002). Comprehensive place-based initiatives have a variety of approaches; some focus on addressing a range of physical, economic, and social problems while others focus on an integrated approach to a specific problem, such as strengthening families (Greenberg et al., 2010).

**WHY PLACE MATTERS FOR FEDERAL FUNDING**

Working with the strengths and assets of place increases the probability of attracting more federal funding. While the place-based approach is not new, it is receiving renewed attention from funders, policy makers, and practitioners. As a result of the economic downturn, they are being forced to assess more critically how to ensure that their funds yield tangible results. Why does place matter for federal grant seekers? Working in a place-based mode creates more possibilities for activities that win points in federal grant competitions:

**Collaboration**

Federal agencies across policy areas are more often than not looking for collaboration and partnerships in applicants’ proposals. Collaboration is one of the most prevalent themes throughout the literature on comprehensive place-based initiatives. A multi-level approach to collaboration - working both horizontally and vertically - increases the capacity of a community and the individuals working and living together in
place to address problems more effectively. Working horizontally across local actors, organizations, and partnerships provides a range of seamless interventions that are sensitive and responsive to local conditions (Bradford, 2005). Working vertically by forging relationships and networks that connect across the local, state, and national levels links places to essential policy makers and funders who can relay critical information and knowledge (Bradford, 2005). This multi-level approach brings diverse stakeholders together who can pool expertise and resources to more effectively determine community problems and collectively plan for and address the identified issues (Hellwig, 2002, Bradford, 2005, Kubisch et al, 2002 and Miller and Burns, 2006).

**Planning**

Federal agencies look for evidence of community support when they evaluate proposals and many of the new federal initiatives require a planning component as part of the program. The importance of cultivating a shared vision, establishing collective decision-making processes, and participating in a planning process enables participants to think more comprehensively and to break out of their “silo” mentalities (Hellwig, 2002, Bradford, 2005, Kubisch et al, 2002, and Miller and Burns, 2006). Participatory planning processes demonstrate that community residents, businesses, local public officials, and non-profit institutions took part in determining the needs and priorities of the community and the strategies to address them within their local context. Planning establishes buy-in as well as an additional level of accountability to the community.

**Leveraging and Increased Cost Effectiveness**

Federal agencies look for proposals that leverage additional resources and are cost effective. The presence of a coordinated and effective place-based initiative raises visibility, legitimacy, and influence of the community’s activities thereby increasing their ability to leverage new and additional public and private resources (Kubisch et al, 2010). Community plans developed as part of a collaborative effort raises the ability of communities to garner more resources -
from both public and private sources - than if funding had been pursued in a more piecemeal and siloed fashion (Miller and Burns, 2006). Well organized, collaborative place-based initiatives also reduce duplication in service delivery and provide opportunities for linked organizations to share resources and responsibility for developing the matching funds required by many federal grant applications.

**Continuous Place-Based Proposal Development**

Federal proposal development is a cumulative process. Illinois ResourceNet’s continuous proposal building strategy increases the efficiency of proposal development by building off of previously submitted proposal documents including background information on the organizations accomplishments, cost estimates and budgets, program designs, and research on community demographic data for new proposal submissions (Kordesh, 2010). The presence of high functioning collaborations and community plans provide place-based initiatives with the opportunity to engage in long-term fundraising planning.

Continuous proposal building uses the plans created by communities to develop federal grants matrices that layer federal funding streams across policy areas to further place-based development (Kordesh, 2010). These grants matrices provide collaboratives with funding maps that demonstrate how communities can use federal funding over time to drive comprehensive community and economic development. In addition, participating in the process of continuous proposal development strengthens relationships between partners and, through these relationships, provides access to additional resources that can be leveraged.

**Federal Policy Directions**

The Obama Administration clearly endorses place-based policy, and has launched an interagency evaluation to examine the effectiveness of existing place-based policies and to identify opportunities for interagency coordination and collaboration (Cytron, 2010, and Orszag et al., 2009). As part of this effort, federal agencies that have historically operated in isolation of one another are being asked to look for ways of improving coordinated
efforts both within and between agencies. Federal agencies are investigating how to coordinate grant application requirements and joint requests for proposals, standardize performance measures, and develop incentive grants that demonstrate how to use multiple funding streams (Orszag, 2009). In addition, interagency working groups have been formed to investigate how to build holistic, interdisciplinary, and integrated policy across multiple geographic scales. The Administration has also launched several new place-based programs including HUD’s Choice Neighborhood Program, the Department of Education’s Promise Neighborhoods program, the Sustainable Communities Initiative, the Regional Innovation Clusters Initiative, and the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, to name a few.

At the “Improving the Outcomes of Place-Based Initiatives” conference, Raphael Bostic of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development described the growing reach of federal policy in favor of place as “path-breaking and unprecedented” (Cytron, 2010). Similar in some respects to Kotkin, the Obama Administration recognizes that the importance of place will grow as our nation’s population grows; this shift sets up an extraordinary opportunity to create more sustainable and holistic communities for generations to come (Orszag, 2009).

Illinois ResourceNet sees the emergence of place as an opportunity for communities and regions in Illinois to build on local cultural, geographical, social, and economic assets to make federal funding supportive of their aspirations. Aligning funding around place-based strategies enable Illinois non-profits, businesses, and municipal governments to build stronger and healthier communities for all residents.
References:


