New York City Councilmember Brad Lander on building better neighborhoods with community participation
April 25, 2012

I’m Brad Lander. I’m a member of the New York City Council and I live in and represent neighborhoods in Brooklyn, New York.

I came to elected office from being involved in community development groups in Brooklyn. Working on affordable housing, on job creation, on saving our commercial strips, on creating and preserving good jobs. And so all my time in Brooklyn has been, “How do we bring people together in our neighborhood to preserve what we love about it and to change the things we want to work on?”

The neighborhoods that I represent are really great examples of what’s right about smart growth. Park Slope, the neighborhood that I live in, has a fantastic park, Prospect Park. Calvert Vaux, the designers of Central Park, after they did that once, when they really wanted to get it right, they did it in the middle of Brooklyn at Prospect Park. And so more than a hundred years ago people carved out 160 acres – were willing to pay for it at a time when Brooklyn was developing rapidly – to build this park that has made our neighborhood great. We’ve got great public transit – again, invested in over a hundred years ago. And so part of the question is what do we have to do to make sure the generations after us are going to continue to benefit from the fantastic urban infrastructure in this neighborhood.

One thing that’s happened in recent years in our neighborhoods is a real effort to make sure that we ensure not just safe streets but also really livable streets that give more vitality to our neighborhoods. So for me it does start from a safety issue. Almost every year in New York City the number one cause of fatalities among kids one to twelve is being hit by cars as pedestrians. So the numbers come down, but it’s still way too high. And so our first responsibility is “How do we keep our people safe?”

At the same time we have a great transportation commissioner, Janette Sadik-Khan, who has put together an agenda which says: Let’s figure out how to make people safe when they’re crossing the street. Let’s find places for pedestrian plazas where people can gather. Let’s build out our bike infrastructure and our bike networks, both so we can give them another commuting option and get them out of cars, but also so we calm traffic, slow down traffic. And what it’s added up to, really, is in many ways a transformation of the city, a transformation of the neighborhoods. And it’s just got so many different benefits. You’ve got sustainability benefits broadly – we are obviously trying to reduce auto-dependence. It’s got this big safety benefits: again part of what’s driven those fatality and accident numbers down is the investment in making it more livable, more walkable, safer for pedestrians, for bike commuters and safer for drivers as well and giving people more transportation options.

Well one thing I’m doing right now that’s one of the most exciting is I’m one of the first elected officials, local elected officials in the United States experimenting with this thing called participatory
budgeting. Where we leave that decision to the people who live in the neighborhood. So this year for the first time I’m taking a million dollars in discretionary capital – capital that normally the local elected official just gets to decide, “Oh, I’d like to do that project and that project.” And while I might have been motivated to spend that with smart growth principles in mind, I thought you know what, this is taxpayer money and folks who know what we need in the neighborhood are the people who live here. So we’ve opened it up to them. It started with neighborhood assemblies – five neighborhood assemblies – in the neighborhoods around my district. In total almost a thousand people came out and gave ideas. Ideas of every kind, from “This subway entrance is too dark – let’s get a new light,” to “This intersection is dangerous,” to “My kids’ school needs a new science lab,” to “I would like seltzer water fountains out in the parks.” So running the gambit. We now have a hundred people – volunteers in committees figuring out which ones are feasible, how much would they cost, can the agencies do them, are they eligible to be done with city capital. And in March they’re going to go on a ballot and anyone who lives in the district can come out and vote and the projects in rank order, up to a million dollars, those will be the ones that get funded. And one thing that’s been fun for me is you know, I didn’t know – I have no idea, and I still have no idea, the vote’s not till March – but most of the ideas are improvements are to the public realm, they really are things that improve the subway stations, improve the streets, improve the parks. So it is encouraging that what people want are neighborhoods that are nice to live in. It’s not that surprising, but it has been encouraging to see.

We’re at unfortunately this really low time in faith or confidence or belief in the role of government and what it can do. People unfortunately don’t have a lot of confidence that government can deliver the things they want. And don’t see it as – you know, too often it’s something over there that I don’t trust. As opposed to, well government is the decisions we make together about what we want to invest in as far as the neighborhood we’re going to have tomorrow and our kids are going to have in twenty years. Again those decisions I talked about about carving out Prospect Park or taking the money and doing what it took to build out the subway system. It wasn’t done by somebody else, it was done by New Yorkers at the time. And what this has definitely done is brought people together to see and take part in government in that way. People definitely feel, it’s really inspiring – so much work and time, these hundred volunteers who are taking the ideas, they’re meeting every week and they’re going out and visiting all the sites in the neighborhoods. They’ve built bridges across different neighborhoods. I’ve got a big Bangladeshi community in one part of my district in Kensington, and folks that have been in the neighborhood for generations, a lot of new young people. And the committees have all those folks and they really are taking this question of, alright, well these are our resources, these are our communities. What is it that we want to do to make it even better? So it really has served to do that.