Smart Growth Stories: A Mayor’s Perspective
March 6, 2012

“I’m Mark Mallory, Mayor of Cincinnati, Ohio.

“Cincinnati’s a great place. It’s a city of hills, I like to say. It is the seat of an area that has about 2.1 million people in it. We’ve got world class museums and theaters, and a world class opera and symphony and ballet. We’ve got a fantastic zoo, one of the top five children’s hospitals in the world. A bunch of Fortune 500 companies are headquartered there. Great neighborhoods and of course fantastic people.

“One of the challenges that we have in Cincinnati is the same challenge that most cities are going to have in our tier which is we’ve got to be able to attract and retain young people. We’ve got to be able to attract and build companies that are going to create jobs. People are looking for public transportation when they’re deciding what cities they want to be in. They’re looking for public infrastructure to be in place. They’re looking for all these elements that you’ll see in larger cities that are stable and have growing populations. We’re trying to incorporate those elements into the City of Cincinnati to try to level out that playing field.

“People say they live in a particular city. ‘I live in New York,’ ‘I live in St. Louis’ or ‘I live in Cincinnati.’ But what they’re really talking about in terms of how they feel their lives are going is how they enjoy their place. And that usually is down to the neighborhood level. So those neighborhood amenities of public libraries and grocery stores, seemingly small things, small shops, walkability, parks, open space, green space and of course nice housing. Those are the things that people really think about and internalize when they talk about the quality of their neighborhood. And we’ve got to be very focused and make sure that we are building places for people to be and places for people to feel comfortable.

“We’re doing a lot of things in Cincinnati. In addition to building the streetcar, we are developing our riverfront with a project called The Banks. This is the space between our two stadiums. It’s going to be more than 300 apartments – this is just in the first phase – retailers, there’s a giant park that will be a part of it. This project will go in to its second phase in the next couple weeks actually, and before it’s over with we’ll probably spend a billion dollars on our riverfront.

“A lot of people judge the quality of a neighborhood by the main streets that run through the neighborhood, and that’s where our business districts lie. So we’ve got to put a lot of energy into making sure those business districts looks good, making sure they actually have viable businesses in them. Making sure they have retailers that people want at the neighborhood level. We also have to do all of these things in the context of an entire city. And I think a lot of times, I know people in most cities sort of break down the different aspects of smart growth – they may not think of that term, but they may think of transportation or land use planning or neighborhood development or
economic development. They make think of those things as separate items but they're really all connected.

“People were slow to embrace some of the changes that we’re proposing because they didn’t necessarily see how, say, the development of a streetcar would lead to more jobs. They didn’t necessarily see how investing so much money in downtown allowed for improvements in neighborhoods. So I’ve had to explain to people that downtown is the engine, is the economic engine for everything that happens in our entire region. And the more people that are working downtown, the more successful downtown is, the more success we have in attracting new business, new people, and new opportunities.

“I think we’ve got to build a city that is walkable, that has a vibrant downtown, that has vibrant neighborhood business districts, that has open spaces and green spaces, and a city that is sustainable, that understands the importance of building in sustainability as we continue to rebuild our city.

“Well times are tough, and you will hear people use that term that you shouldn’t do something in ‘these economic times,’ and I absolutely disagree with that. I think that these economic times require you to invest in the things that you know are going to grow your future, that you know are going to grow your economy or bring jobs, or bring a more livable city to your citizens. And I would advise elected officials who are out there, who are trying to figure out how to get things done to call others who have done those things. Get in touch with Smart Growth America. This organization has access to a lot of people who are doing a lot of things and have done those things really well. I see it as a clearing house for smart growth in general.”