

# Where do we go From here?

Moderator: **Fred LeBrun**, Columnist, Albany Times Union;  
Panel Members: **David Church**, Executive Director, New York Planning Federation;  
**Patrick Hooker**, Director of Government Relations, New York Farm Bureau;  
**Philip LaRocque**, Executive Vice President, New York State Builders Association;  
**David J. Miller**, Executive Director, Audubon New York

“A quality community can only be created when its residents, businesses and community leaders collectively visualize and agree upon the potential of their community, adopt this ideal with a plan to achieve it and then work together to harness available resources and become what they have envisioned.”

- *Quality Communities Task Force Report*



*Moderator*

**Fred LeBrun**  
Columnist, Albany Times Union

The panel was moderated and introductions provided by Albany Times Union Columnist Fred LeBrun. Mr. LeBrun asked each of the panelists, “Okay, there has been a lot of great discussion today, but now where do we go from here?”

**David Church**  
Executive Director,  
New York Planning Federation

Mr. Church began by praising the Quality Communities Task Force Report for “recognizing the critical role that home rule officials play as well as other community leaders be they in government or not.” As a representative for planning and zoning officials, he feels that for too long they have been under appreciated and lacking in resources.

In terms of money, Mr. Church, argues, that as a planner if they were given one hundredth of what is spent on economic development or on open space preservation to do local planning, that they could “actually more proactively address where development ought to occur.” In addition to the state giving more money for planning, he also sees as the state’s role to give technical assistance. But, he emphasized that for the state to give money and technical assistance to local communities the first thing the state needs to do is to challenge communities to think regionally. He said, “You’ve got to partner up. It’s no more doing it alone by yourself in a place that’s based in the nineteenth century at best.”

The second aspect he supports is for the state to create incentives for collaborative planning. He said, “We’ve got to embrace the notion that the more people involved, the earlier the better.” And lastly, he said, “it needs to be principle based, that this community work we do has to be anchored in some general principles,” which should be outlined by the state.



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Given the three roles he feels the state should be playing, he said, “If I have any criticism of the task force report, the state role isn’t all that clear to me... I think there is a larger leadership [role] from the state to send that clear message about what is a community’s or a region’s role in the larger state public interest.”

In addition, Mr. Church advocated finding the mechanisms by which the more difficult issues of smart growth can be addressed. According to Mr. Church, while collaborative consensus building processes are needed, the downside is often times they avoid issues like affordable housing, for example, because nobody can agree on where to put it. He said, “We can’t just park those for discussion next year or five years from now.”

**Philip LaRocque**  
Executive Vice President  
New York State Builders Association

Mr. LaRocque emphasized several key issues in determining the success of smart growth:

- 1) Collaborative Planning Process. According to Mr. LaRocque, we need to support a “collaborative effort to make smart growth a workable term, something that’s practical.”
- 2) Up-front commitment from local government officials. He supported the notion that local government’s role is to provide things like resources, technical assistance, facilitation, rooms, and/or mailing lists. However, he said, “The key words here are, get the commitment of the local government and have them get the heck out of the way, and then they come back into it, to complete the loop, and to make a decision as policy makers they were elected to make and without that, it’s not going to work.”
- 3) Better Use of Current Land Use Tools. Mr. LaRocque emphasized the need for everyone to “understand and appreciate the current tools we already have for land use management.” According to Mr. LaRocque, the currently available tools, such as transfer of development rights, incentive zoning, cluster development, planned unit development, conservation easements are not being used, except by a few “visionary communities.”
- 4) Brownfields. He said, “If there’s one piece of legislation that we need this year to really realize expanded ability for local governments and municipalities to fit into a smart growth plan, that is brownfield redevelopment. Without that, I don’t think the dream and vision of brownfields or smart growth can actually be realized.”

- 5) Training. According to Mr. LaRocque, “Our planning and zoning boards as well meaning, well intentioned as they are, many of them lack for training.” He emphasized that these people are making multi-million dollar decisions and there should be some sort of state mandated training for them.
- 6) Housing Affordability. He said, “I have to say one of my concerns with the smart growth movement and the new urbanism and other similar movements is that it’s being portrayed more and more as an elitist movement.” He pointed to the lack of affordable housing in New York state and the need to bring the issue into the smart growth discussion before we go any further.

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**Edward Farrell**  
Executive Director,  
New York State Conference of Mayors

Mr. Farrell touched on the findings in NYCOM’s recent report, *The State of the Cities*, and said, “While we represent both villages and cities, we, within our organization, we do realize that there is a difference of what’s going on in cities and has been going on for the last several decades.” According to Mr. Farrell, cities have been experiencing “an ongoing policy of somewhat benign neglect” and an unfair reputation for not being run better or being able to control their spending.

However, according to the findings of their report, cities are spending at less than the rate of inflation, which Mr. Farrell said, “is extraordinary considering paid police and fire departments and the other services they provide.” But at the same time, the report found that city taxes are going up at twice the rate of inflation. According to Mr. Farrell, the reason for this is that internally cities are losing their tax bases. He said, “Over half the cities have an annual decline of over one percent on their tax base annually, which means they have to raise taxes just to maintain the same level of income from that source.”

In addition, Mr. Farrell pointed to New York state’s fiscal crisis in the early 90’s when

aid to local government was cut. Because of this, he said that over the last ten years, “revenue sharing is \$2.1 billion less than it would have been if the money had just stayed at the same rate it was ten years ago.” And while the governor and legislature have made some increases in recent years, it has not made up the difference. So in order for cities to get that money, he said, “You’re going to raise taxes, you’re going to cut services, and over a period of time, there’s a limit as to how much people are going to pay more in taxes for less services.”

Mr. Farrell pointed to the recent Census figures as painting “an abysmal picture of what’s going on in cities.” He said, “Three out of four cities in New York state lost population, and almost all of the cities that gained population are downstate. When you look at upstate New York, people are leaving cities in droves.” According to the report, upstate cities altogether have lost 24 percent of their population since 1970. Pointing to these data, Mr. Farrell emphasized, “at the same time, the infrastructure is there. You have to have a police force. You have to have a fire department. You have to maintain the water system. What we see is a vicious cycle that is not getting better, and if we don’t make some changes, it will only get worse, and that’s not in anyone’s best interest.”

**Patrick Hooker**  
Director of Government Relations,  
New York Farm Bureau

Mr. Hooker began by referring to Mr. Farrell's comments and said, "I think if cities do well and the quality of life improves there, most of this discussion doesn't need to occur."

According to Mr. Hooker, the New York Farm Bureau is a private, voluntary farmer organization, representing farmers in every county of all commodities and all sizes. From his experience he has found that "when a farmer owns his or her farm, it is the most important thing perhaps, other than his family, that he or she owns. His mission in life is to be there and to run the farm. That's what they want to do. There isn't a farmer in this state that wants to sell road frontage or that wants things to negatively impact the operation. Every farmer will farm right up to their dying day if they have some way to pay the bills. If there is some profit in the operation, they will stay because it is what they love to do."

In terms of the Quality Communities Task Force Report, he said that the Farm Bureau participated in the process and supports the agricultural recommendations. He pointed to the importance of conservation easements and voluntary purchasing of development rights for farmers that see change in their community

and want to create a lasting legacy. However, he emphasized that some farmers don't have development rights, and that "there are no options for farmers in many places of the state." He suggested it was therefore important to support all of the options, whether it be for a "small farmer working out of the back of a pickup truck" or a "large multi-hundred or thousand acre vegetable operation" so that they can each meet their own goals.

Some of the challenges he sees for farmers are government driven and some come from the "externalities of a world of global trade now that we can't change." He is unsure what New York state's farming landscape will look like in ten years, but pointed to what Long Island looked like 20 or 30 years ago. He said, "We know that the farmers that are there today are not farming the same way they did" and that the ones that remain are still there and successful because they were open to different opportunities such as vineyards or multi-vegetable operations. According to Mr. Hooker, this "happens all throughout the state. Farmers have had to change."

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However, in order for farmers to change, he emphasized their need for access to new thinking and good advice. He pointed to their need to access technology, new products, new processing techniques, information on how to market better or differently or grow different crops. He said that these are the types of things in the Quality Communities Task Force Report's recommendations, but it is very difficult for a farmer who has only ever done one thing to change.

He concluded by urging the continuation of dialogue and working with allies in keeping farms viable and preserving open space.



**David J. Miller**  
Executive Director, Audubon New York

Mr. Miller emphasized the importance of the Smart Growth Working Group staying together as a collaborative effort of many diverse groups to build consensus on a final goal and vision for smart growth. He said, "We're not in a race to implement all 43 recommendations by tomorrow morning. We all recognize that we're in for the long haul on this." He pointed out that while not all 43 recommendations in the Quality Communities Task Force Report can be immediately implemented, "there are a lot of things that we can do on a short-term and a long-term basis."

Mr. Miller discussed the open space and natural resource needs that he felt the state could make some progress on this year. He emphasized the need in this year's budget process to support the farmland restoration tax credit programs and the extended farm school tax credit programs that are in the Executive Budget. In addition, he pointed to the increase proposed for the Environmental Protection Fund, and encouraged everyone to contact their legislator and urge their support of this increase for open space and farmland protection. Another budget item he pointed to in the Executive Budget is the Conservation Donor Tax Credit Program, which he said

is "a very important initiative that can help enormously."

Finally, Mr. Miller emphasized the need for the legislature and the governor to continue funding for the Quality Community Grants Program. He said, "If we're going to win on this issue in the long term, we're going to win it community by community across New York state, and this funding can help provide for collaborative programs when home builders, farmers, environmentalist, conservationists, planners, can start working together on a local

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level to do open space planning, to do visioning processes." According to Mr. Miller, the ratio of applications to available money in last year's grant process was 17 to 1, and so he said, "This is an incredible need and interest is out there and the more that we can do in that area, the more we can build constituencies to implement these programs across New York state." He also emphasized the importance for the lieutenant governor to continue with her efforts with the interagency task force to oversee the grants program and the other programs needed for this effort.

