Category: **Legislative Campaign**
Sub-Category: **State Campaign**
Entry Name: **The Sustainable Communities Act of 2010**

"Helping us make informed choices about the kind of future we envision for our state and the kind of progress that will help us realize that vision."
- Governor Martin O'Malley

Realigning Priorities and Reinvestments

Governor O'Malley sponsored the Sustainable Communities Act during the 2010 session of the Maryland General Assembly to reauthorize and realign key state reinvestment programs. Supported by a broad coalition, the legislation significantly restructured and realigned programs managed by four key state agencies; the departments of Housing and Community Development, Transportation, Planning, and Business and Economic Development.

The legislation had three goals: to reauthorize and strengthen the planning department's historic rehabilitation tax credit, which was about to sunset and had seen significant funding cuts in recent years; to consolidate eligible target areas for DHCD's community revitalization grant and loan programs and establish these areas as shared priorities for the other three agencies; and to unify multiagency input into decision-making.

Doing the Homework

But building that coalition didn't just happen. Research and collaboration drove the policy proposal and helped anchor legislative support. It required the four agencies to work together to understand the needs of Maryland's older communities and craft strategies to address them. Before the introduction of the Act, the state's Task Force on the Future for Growth and Development in Maryland – a group of public- and private-sector leaders working to advance smart growth practices – conducted a comprehensive review of the state's approach to community development and revitalization investment. The task force set up a revitalization workgroup to examine how Maryland agencies use resources to benefit older communities and their lower-income residents. The target areas for each program were mapped using the Geographic Information System. In addition, past funding decisions were tracked, mapped, and charted to better understand the depth and breadth of investment. The resulting report, Sustainable Maryland, (available at www.maryland.green.gov) was issued in January 2010.

The workgroup reported a lack of coordination among state agencies on decisions related to housing and community development. The Sustainable Communities designation and broader legislation was conceived as a way to address this lack of coordination. In addition, the Sustainable Maryland report established a four-point sustainability framework to ensure that the history and culture of older communities would be valued and that existing lower income residents would be connected to new opportunities for housing and jobs in improving communities.

Once the legislative proposal was developed, the data was then organized by legislative district so that legislators could see clearly how the Sustainable Communities Act would affect their constituents.

Ultimately, data and mapping proved pivotal in driving the policy decisions that shaped the legislation as well as garnering the support to pass it.

Building Stakeholder Coalitions

After the revitalization workgroup completed its research, strategy sessions with stakeholders were held to determine how to build support in the face of tough economic times and severe fiscal challenges. The economic development potential of the Historic Tax Credit was the anchor of Maryland's push for reauthorization but broader support was needed to ensure passage through the powerful Senate Budget and Tax Committee and two separate House committees where the Act would be assigned. By broadening the scope of the legislation to incorporate affordable housing and community development needs, the Act's revitalization and economic development theme garnered the support of a very diverse coalition and stakeholders from business and economic development groups to affordable housing and transit advocates as well as Maryland's very influential environmental and local government communities.

Kicking the legislative push off, a Sustainable Communities rally day was held and was attended by hundreds of individuals, diverse and industry constituency groups, and wide array of legislators from both sides of the aisle representing urban, suburban, and rural of areas of Maryland. The diverse coalition of support was key to engage the commitment of legislators to dig into a very complex bill covering four state agency programs while struggling with a budget deficit in an election year. Workgroups of legislators were formed in both the House and Senate to better understand the bill and the highly interrelated and interdependent parts. Through strong relationships with legislators, challenges to the structuring of the bill and the fiscal impact were identified and addressed through amendments sponsored by the administration. The Sustainable Communities Act of 2010 passed with bipartisan support in both chambers on the last day of the session.

Tearing Down the Silos

Very often government agencies work in "silos" rather than coordinating investment to achieve more livable communities. Coordinated agency investment is particularly important for improving the housing and economic conditions in underserved communities with low- and moderate-income households.

Maryland was able to get an important piece of legislation such as the Sustainable Communities Act passed during a period of fiscal austerity through extensive research using state-of-the art data bases such as the Geographic Information System and relentless coalition building, bringing together groups with diverse interests.

Passing this legislation met all three of the governor's goals: reauthorizing and strengthening the planning department's historic rehabilitation tax credit, consolidating eligible target areas for DHCD's community revitalization grant and loan programs and establishing these areas as shared priorities for the other three agencies; and unifying multiagency input into decision-making. Maryland's neighborhoods will now benefit from this unification of resources.