June 18, 2010 – A White House urban policy adviser endorsed the Red Fields to Green Fields concept as a “perfect match” for the administration’s approach to cities and pledged to work with the project’s leaders to convene a meeting with administration officials.

Derek Douglas, Special Assistant to the President for Urban Affairs on the Domestic Policy Council, said the White House had identified three goals for its urban policy: economic competitiveness, environmental sustainability and social inclusion.

“It you take these three broad policy goals and you overlay them on Red Fields to Green Fields, it’s a perfect match,” Douglas told city and parks officials gathered in Washington D.C. on June 16 for a conference on the real estate/parks project. The multi-disciplinary and multi-jurisdictional approach, he said, “is at the core of our urban policy work.”

Douglas’s comments launched the conference, which also included an explanation of the economic underpinning for the project, detailed reports from the first six cities involved and a discussion of the financing tools that can help turn distressed commercial real estate into vibrant urban parks. The event included representatives from communities in the second round of the project: Detroit, Hilton Head/Savannah, Houston, Los Angeles and Phoenix.

Douglas described several interagency programs that he said would fit well with the Red Fields to Green Fields philosophy: the Sustainable Communities Initiative, Urban Water Initiative and Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative. He echoed President Obama’s remarks that the nation should “stop seeing the cities as a problem and start seeing them as a solution.”

City Parks Alliance’s Catherine Nagel, speaking at the conference, said support from Washington is critical to the transformational initiative. She argued for a federal investment of $200 billion and creation of a land bank with zero percent interest on loans. “This is both a real estate problem and a banking problem,” she said.

Mike Messner, who conceived the project, explained the economic situation, recounting how the value of commercial real estate has dropped $3 trillion in recent years and how 65 percent of regional malls are in weak or weakening financial situations. He explained that retail sales are migrating to the Internet, leaving less need for storefronts. And he told how 775 banks are in the FDIC’s problem list, meaning many more could fail before the recession is over.

Unveiling the Plans

After a broad discussion of the economic issues, representatives from the first round of cities described their progress in assessing the supply of distressed commercial real estate in their communities and the best approaches to turning some of that property into parkland. Altogether, the plans would create 20,000 acres of new parkland and 100,000 new jobs.

Details included:

✓ **Atlanta** is seeking financing for projects that could launch the R2G plan there, Georgia Tech Research Institute’s Kevin Caravati explained. The program is under the auspices of the Atlanta Regional Commission, and the commission’s chairman, Tad Leithead, spoke about criteria developed to screen property. The factors include proximity to transit and bike paths, park density, job-to-housing balance and adjacent natural resources, among others. Jeff Rader of DeKalb County, one of 10 counties in the commission, showed off proposed renovations for two aging malls. The plans would replace acres of asphalt lots with green space, while still leaving room for commercial and residential development.

✓ **Cleveland** finds itself with plenty of surplus real estate and plenty of parks, said Terry Schwarz of the Kent State University Urban Design Center. With 17,000 vacant, foreclosed homes, the Cleveland team has developed a plan that deals with the real estate surplus while restoring water and air quality. They envision a downtown public square that reclaims roads and other paved surfaces to create a signature park; an extended towpath trail and a state-of-the-art rowing facility. With a $1 billion investment, they could take 1,850 acres of real estate off the market, create 120 miles of connected greenway, restore the air and water, create 8,000 jobs and develop an attractive waterfront that could draw new businesses to the city.

✓ **Denver** has lost 50,000 jobs in the Great Recession, nearly 10,000 of them in construction, said Scott Robson of the Denver’s Parks & Recreation Department. Unlike other cities, though, the population continues to grow. Their plan for acquiring park land focuses on old industrial sites along the South Platte River to “give the residents back the river as a public place,” he said. The Denver team is also...
looking at transit-oriented development. With $3 billion in investment, Denver could take 6,650 acres of real estate off the market, double the size of the park system, create 30,000 jobs and create $5.1 billion in economic impact.

Miami-Dade County emphasizes transit-oriented parks and linking green space to two national parks in its Red Fields to Green Fields plan, said John Bowers, of the Miami-Dade County Park and Recreation Department. In some cases, they would retrofit existing transit facilities to add open space. The team would also plan parks as the metro rail system expands. A $5 billion investment would buy up 53 percent of the available property, add about 1,900 acres to the park system, bring in $58.8 million in additional property taxes and add 14,000 construction jobs and 25,000 more with subsequent development.

Philadelphia has already made the conversion from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy, buffering the city somewhat from the economic downturn. The city also has a robust park system. But there remain several distressed industrial properties and abandoned lots that could be converted into park space, said Maitreyi Roy of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. The Philadelphia team envisions expanding the Penn Treaty Park along the Delaware River and Cynwyd Regional Trail. With $3.5 billion in investment, they could take 4,650 acres of real estate off the market while creating 113,000 jobs and realizing $4.3 billion in economic impact.

Wilmington, another aging city, has lost 18,000 jobs in the recession, 6,000 of them in construction; more than a quarter of the city’s office space in vacant, said Christian Willauer of Cornerstone West, a community development corporation. The Wilmington plan focuses on distressed real estate in neighborhoods in the city’s west end where there is little access to parks. With an investment of $22 million, the team could take half the distressed real estate off the market, create 300 jobs, double the green space in the city and ensure that every resident lives within 50 feet of a park.

Understanding the Tools

To turn these plans into reality, city representatives recognize they need some tools. The most important, of course, is financing. Leithead said Atlanta is trying to get the find private and philanthropic support for one of its projects as a demonstration. “We think if we can execute along these lines and show that it works, then we have something to show the federal government,” he said.

A land bank is also crucial to preserving vacant land until conditions are right for its sale or its use for a public park. Cleveland already has a bank set up, and Wilmington is using federal neighborhood stabilization funds to buy up vacant property and working with nonprofit developers to renovate them. Dan Kildee, president of the Center for Community Progress, told the group about his experience developing a renowned land bank in Flint, Mich. He described the kind of changes that need to occur at the state level to allow an effective system for claiming and reusing vacant land.

Beyond land banks, the R2G teams need to work with actual banks, said Tom Murphy, who as mayor of Pittsburgh led the successful renewal of the city core. Murphy, now a senior resident fellow at the Urban Land Institute, described taking thousand of acres left vacant by collapse of the steel industry and insisting that green space be an integral part of any redevelopment. “If you create parks you can create great value,” he told the group. “It’s the most enduring legacy we can do.”

Murphy encouraged the teams to explore tax increment financing, block grant funding, philanthropic support and, in particular, the Community Redevelopment Act requirements for banks. Cities should ensure that banks are investing all they should throughout the city. “If you’re not dealing with you banks from a position of strength,” he said, “you’re leaving a huge amount of money on the table.”

In Brooklyn, park planners are using zoning changes and agreements with developers to create two new parks from abandoned industrial spaces along the waterfront, said Joshua Laird, assistant commissioner for planning and parking land in the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation.

On the federal level, FDIC official Dave McDermott walked the teams through the federal agency’s process for disposing of assets at failed banks. He described how packages of assets could be assembled and sold to investors.

City Parks Alliance board member Jackie Carrera closed the meeting with a nod to the “paradigm shift” that the Red Fields to Green Fields project had produced and the leadership and vision that cities have shown in “evaluating, testing and proving that it’s possible.”