

Vibrant NEO 2040 – Vision Session Q&A Transcript
Northeast Ohio Sustainable Communities Consortium

Kent State University Ashtabula Campus (Ashtabula, OH)
October 16, 2013

Panel: Sara Maier, Transportation Planner, NOACA (SM)
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Rachel McCartney, Program Manager, Eastgate Regional Council of Governments (RM)
Paul Volpe, President, City Architecture (PV)

Question/Comment: Are there any thoughts at all about moving toward a more robust food producing piece of the region including possibly regulation or at least incentives?

S.M: Just in terms of some of the recommendations urban agriculture is one area that is definitely getting a lot of attention. We are making sure we are preserving our farmland so that opportunities like that are not lost. Getting down to that specific level of detail, I don't think we are going down that far there are certainly projects and pilots and other tools that are being promoted by members of the community and our consortium of ways that people are doing good things in the region that can be applied to other areas.

J.G: Let me just add, and Jim knows, at the local level at the Youngstown/Warren area we've been working with the food producers and the local folks and promoting what they are doing using foods locally and some of our businesses. We will continue to do that as part of our work program and our agency.

R.M: We're fully in support of everything you are doing to promote local foods.

Question/Comment: One of the questions that I would have is as we go through these questions and we look at this presentation I think so many things seem to be appealing at least to me but it's very hard to get what the cost has associated with these things. If you said, well is running a rail line from Sandusky to Erie a great idea that would be wonderful how much more am I willing to pay in taxes to allow that to happen and I think the resources have to come from someplace they're either reallocated into something else that may be would be important to me is now not going to be able to be done or else taxpayers are going to have to put more into the system to do it. I'm not sure if the proposal with this vision is a reallocation of already existing resources or finding new resources which I would assume would be tax dollars to make them happen. Maybe you can elaborate on how this vision will happen. What resources will make it possible to come to fruition?

J.G: From the viewpoint of the metropolitan planning organizations and again there's four of us in this 12 county area. In our case we administer not only highway funds but environmental funds EPA funds Appalachian regional commission funds and all that stuff. A major problem we have is financing, you are absolutely correct. We've looked at a passenger rail for years between Cleveland Pittsburgh and running through the Youngstown area and even up to the Cleveland area up to Erie Pennsylvania. The funding is going to be a major problem. There's so many uncertainties when it comes to federal funding and you can tell with what our congress is doing to us right now, but even with the highway legislation

each three years we update our transportation long range plan and we have to look at finances out to 2040 and its very difficult because of all the unknowns with the finances. That's one area that in the continuing phase of this we will know what people want we will know what policies we want to look at we will know what improvements we want to look at then we got to think how are we going to fund these policies and practices.

S.M: I'd like to add on to that too that in doing the scenario planning process we wanted to make sure that we weren't just proposing things that everyone would say that's great what does it cost. So we have a fiscal impact model that is built into this scenario planning program so that we can figure out what some of those costs would be and for the example of building rail during the 2nd round of engagement we did actually have a board that showed people are saying they want rail this is how much a mile of rail costs this is how many people can be supported on a mile of rail vs. a mile of bikeway vs. a mile of roadway vs. BRT bus rapid transit vs. regular bus so people can see that there are tradeoffs and there will have to be tradeoffs of what you want to implement and one of the things we did show is the overall cost to government budgets are for the grow the same scenario and for the trends scenario those perform worse than both of the differently scenarios the grow differently and just doing things differently which means a different policy bundle so maybe you aren't building all the new roads and so we're looking at what are the long term impacts going out to 2040 given the different options so we've tried to add in the fiscal piece to make it realistic.

Question/Comment: People are all very interested in stopping sprawl. Sprawl is what you call dispersed development. Every day there is new housing developments going up in green fields and even here in Ashtabula there's new strip malls being built at the edge of the commercial area so what that says to me is that there are very powerful incentives for sprawl probably I would guess at the state level particularly so I didn't hear any talk in the recommendations about how to discentivize this thing that has been incentivized clearly for a long long time and that's a piece that I think is missing and I wonder if you could comment on that.

P.V: Very important question at least in my opinion it's something that we deal with everyday in what we do in the communities we work in the question comes up in town meetings in city halls in counsel chambers in planning commissions throughout the region and all the places we work in because usually I don't work at this scale .I don't work at the scale of the whole region I come to Ashtabula and I work on a plan for Ashtabula or a Main street or something like that. And we deal with this. I will tell you that there's 2 sides to that. One is each community we are a home rural region a home rural state we make our own decisions and every community needs to look internally and with the citizen rate and make decisions as to the things that are important to them zoning codes obviously have an impact on where and how people develop and how development is perceived and economically supported when we're In a depressed state sometimes people say well any development is better than no development so lets do what we have to do to support it without thinking of the longer term consequences of do we really want that or is that causing small businesses to go out of business to support that new strip shopping center that got built out on the edge of town or out on the excerpts it's looking more holistically at the things that have longer term value extending roads and sewers with public dollars is something that developers always ask for well if you don't want the development you don't give it to them and you have to be vocal about that. On the other end of it we talked about things like compact development we talked about my kids my daughters 33 and my son is 35 and they both live in compact places and they love it. So supporting reinvestment areas and making those desirable to developers in lewd of doing sprawl kind of development can help reverse those trends. If the demand isn't there then the

development won't occur. Again developers want to put money in their pocket and so you provide options. One way that is done that often occurs is to make land available using public money and the state of Ohio has been great at this with issue 1 which is their brownfield program but they offer money to communities to clean up brownfields for new developments so it provides a level playing field for the developer instead of building out in a conservation area or agricultural land they can build inward because the government is helping level the playing field. At the end of the day the public money expenditure is actually less because you're not building the roads and the sewers they're already the transportation network is already there and guess what generally the homes are already there around it so it takes time everything is increments but I think it is doable and it is doable at a reasonable or level cost.

Question/Comment: I was surprised you didn't say anything on education and so is there any comment on that if you're planning in 2040 I'm really surprised education is not a component.

S.M: That was one of our discussions early on in this project and where we ended up landing is that we are looking at things that have a spatial input the scenario planning process builds off land use and land types and so it was very difficult to model anything on education there are some aspects of it like building schools closer into neighborhoods so kids could walk to school or bike to school but that was really beyond the scope of this project because we couldn't model it within the scenario planning program but to your point it is very important for the health of the community and the region.

Question/Comment: I have a question about the public transportation. Has it been considered the difference in the cost and paying because in public transportation people are paying to ride and I know we pay the taxes for the highways but it's not quite the same do the numbers calculate considering that enough people will ride it might take 5 or 6 years enough people will use it to pay for itself and maintain itself.

J.G: Public transportation is another critical financial area we look at. Farebox revenue does not pay for public transportation it's just too expensive. Ridership by itself we are not paying for bus routes and unnecessary routes that will be servicing an area. We work with federal funds we work with state funds unfortunately over the years although we want to promote public transportation. State funding out of ODOT and out of the State of Ohio for public transportation has decreased significantly. So we're looking at other sources, local communities pay property taxes for transit they pay quarter percent sales tax like they do down in Youngstown/Warren area to support public transportation. So that's always going to be a factor that an area can get all the ridership in the world but it's still not going to support the system unless you have some help either from the federal government or the state government or by local tax services.

Question/Comment: Is there any process to identifying energy demands in the future for those of us who don't want to be tied into the grid. I would like to be in an area where I can go to the end of the street and come host whatever yard place comes out I know Detroit shoreway is doing an awful lot with this in Cleveland. We live in Painesville we're designated a food desert because we have no grocery store in Painesville. There are just so many other parts and components to the big picture to look at it holistically and I don't want to get on a bus and go to the west side market to buy my food. We grow a lot of our food on our half-acre but it just seems that there's so much more than what this study is proposing to live in a healthy community.

S.M: I think your point is well taken when we set out to do this it is a regional framework so it's what other governments other communities can look at it and get some information and some data on what did people say that they wanted and we're coming up with recommendations that are more detailed than what we showed you tonight, because we didn't have that time to go into that level of detail and saying who can take on those types of initiatives going down to more of the local level but it will have to be a local initiative do what you're saying what you want to do and that's where we're providing the information of what the feedback told us the direction of what people are saying they want to see and it's up to the local governments to take it on and people to take it on and be champions of it.

Question/Comment: I've had numerous calls pertaining to this group and not one in favor of it. Most people from the townships see this as a way of sharing the wealth since the townships run in the black and have very low debt and they basically see it as a way of sharing out money with other people and the townships are definitely against it. I don't quite understand why the townships that are in the rural areas and have no connection to anything would be interested in mass transit or anything like that.

S.M: What we are showing with this process is that if we continue in the same trend the way we are going all areas are going to fair worse than they are now and so the vast majority of people told us that they wanted to do things differently and what we are proposing is what people have told us they have wanted but then again Ohio is home rural state so the local governments have control of what of this they want to implement and what they don't want to implement but in looking at the financial health of the entire region and of the individual counties in the future with the trend scenario every county does worse going forward into 2040 than the best county now.

J.G: The other thing I want to add too is some of the products that come out of this study whether it be the dashboard or the toolkit we are looking forward of what we can give to the member communities to use to help themselves we are going to have some policies looking at things like the clean Ohio program that helps townships that helps smaller communities we want to keep those things in place but a lot of what's going to come out of here are going to be tools policies suggestions that communities including townships can use to improve what they do now. So it's not that we're doing anything against townships we are just looking at what the people have said so far with respect to the main items we are looking at. Hopefully I know through our agency we work with our townships down in Mahoning and Trumbull County on projects on clean Ohio on Ohio public parks commission projects and those type of things so hopefully we can get something out of this that will be useful for the townships.

Question/Comment: The housing situation compact housing or making housing available, about a year ago it came out that there are more empty houses than there are homeless people. There are plenty of people that are low income and can not get into their own housing because the owners of these empty houses want 800 dollars a month rent and then you pay your own utilities on top of it when they're paying maybe 2 thousand dollars a year in taxes. Do you have a way to get these vacant houses lived in? Instead of tearing them down, make housing affordable a brand new stick built house to Ohio building code. In 2008 Ohio adopted the 2006 international building code which requires a brand new house to be 1200 sq. feet. Well if there's only 2 of you why can't you just build an 800 sq. ft. house or get an older house that's maybe 900 sq. ft. and have it be within the means. This business of a \$125,000 house being called affordable, no.

S.M: One of things that we did look at is housing and transportation affordability together because that's also another determinant that you might be able to afford more housing if you have lesser

transportation costs and that's one of the areas where Northeast Ohio isn't doing as well. We have a lot of people paying more for transportation in terms of housing affordability though we are looking at what are some things local government can do some of those tools John mentioned before on ways to make changes to zoning codes I know that in other areas the zoning code may say you have to build something at least 2200 sq. ft. so it's looking at that is that type of system still working right now are there other ways to modify what we are doing to better meet peoples needs and that is part of what we are trying to look at.

P.V: What I might say you're question is critically important and it deals more than in my opinion with housing it deals with the neighborhoods that those existing houses are in and those neighborhoods are deteriorating and so many people that own those houses don't maintain them they're in it just for the buck and they fall apart they deteriorate they sit vacant and ultimately they become abandoned and it is a shame and I can only tell you that my firm works a lot with the Ohio housing finance agency trying to build and redevelop affordable housing exactly what I think you're suggesting there's not enough of it there needs to be more resources directed to that particularly into existing housing stock there's more and more activity that's occurring unfortunately its mostly in larger core cities and it needs to be everywhere but places like housing network and community development corporations are finding ways to acquire and get this property away from recalcitrant landlords and get it in the hands of people that need it but it's a very large problem.

Question/Comment: It seems like this whole discussion predisposes that the governments role is to control development why does the government even have to be involved in it why not let the free market do what it does naturally it seemed to be working the inner cities are not servicing the needs of their community so they're moving out to places that they do meet. You said before if developer sees an opportunity to make some money it is going to find a way to make it happen. I don't believe that central government control is a good thing. I moved out to Ashtabula County to get away from the city because I want my property I want my land I want to be able to do what I want to do. I don't want people breathing down my neck all the time. I think there are a lot of people out there that feel the way I do but this whole discussion seems to be centered on the idea that it's the government's role to control development. What happened to free market? Why not let people go where they want to go and if the rents are too high where you are don't rent the property the landlord is going to figure it out but I can't get a thousand dollars a month for this little house, okay, then we'll drop the rent to what's appropriate for the market place. I used to have rental properties, the market drives the price of the rent. If the houses, if everyone is building \$250,000 houses in a \$100,000 neighborhood they aren't going to sell and they're going to be stuck with them. But at the same time you don't want to build a \$100,000 house in a \$250,000 neighborhood either. This is a free market. I think the free market does a lot better job of handling this stuff and controlling this stuff. Yeah there are going to be peaks and valleys, but over the long run I think it does a lot better job of controlling things than any government that I've ever been involved in as done long term

J.G: Just from the government we're not trying to stop growth and stop free market development out in the suburbs or out in the housing developments by developers. Somebody once told me that you can't control development. That's true, to a degree. Unfortunately most of the money that we have to build our roads to build our sewers to build our other utilities comes from federal and state forces that go to governments. That's the rules that we live by a lot of those grants have to go to the cities to the counties to the county engineers to the ODOTS of the world for projects. Eventually we have to build a road to get out to those developments to take care of that with the limited funds that we have now I

guess the priority that we are looking at from the input we have gotten so far is to maintain what we've got and to improve the areas like the inner cities where we have water lines and sewer lines and so forth. We're not trying to stop the government by any means. It's just the fact of the way the federal government works and state governments work in getting those projects done.

Question/Comment: When do you think that you will finalize your assessment the studies that you've done and will be getting back into the Ashtabula Area. Will you present that study to basically the same group the same areas?

S.M: We're finalizing the recommendations they should be up on the website within the next couple of days. Not finalizing just making a draft of them up we have to run through some further outreach activities but, the next kind of major phase are going to be those MPO Metropolitan Planning Organization and counsel of government meetings where the elected officials that are members of those boards will get to see it. Those are also meetings that will be open to the public in December. We have a board meeting in December I think it's the 17th if I'm not mistaken where we'll have the full version that is available but we are collecting a lot of input and feedback right now over the next couple months to refine everything

Question/Comment: When you bring that study back into Ashtabula County will you be bringing that study to the commissioners there and including the trustees and onto the townships there or will you be the trustees and the county board or just the county?

S.M: Well we do have basically a group within our office that goes out to a lot of different meetings pretty much anything that we're asked to so I know there have been presentations to township meetings and various other groups. There isn't a meeting specifically for Ashtabula County that's planned like this one for this next round because we're kind of wrapping up with this phase of our work.

J.G: Let me just mention that the county commissioners are members of Eastgate all about Ashtabula County and all of the communities in Ashtabula County through the county commissioners so we can provide that information to them and if the townships trustees would like a presentation we would be glad to give that for them. We could bring information up whatever the commissioners decide that they would feel would be best to service all of the communities in Ashtabula County. They can contact me we would be glad to do that for anybody up in our member communities in the 3 counties.

Question/Comment: At the point of when you're done with the actual document, I'm very curious to understand how you are going to start to implement some of those measures. I work in the city government and I would tell you a lot of those ideas seem very similar to smart growth principals which we have adopted in our comprehensive plan, but what we're challenged with all the time is the capacity within our office to start to do those things such as zoning ordinates changes whether its internally we try to write it ourselves or we try to pay for a consultant those are all costs I think you said it perfectly is that when you are in a depressed area it's very difficult to put those things in place. I hate to see a great document sit on the shelf.

S.M: I think in terms of what we're doing we're trying to put as much information out there as to what are the tools what are the things that other communities within the region are doing so it at least gives you that added layer of information of here's what Elyria is doing about this problem here's the contact information so that you can at least see how things are being implemented and there's also discussion

with our board right now to see if this organization Northeast Ohio Sustainable Communities Consortium will continue into the future and if there will be funding for it to help with things like that. What would its roll be? Technical assistance and kind of data sharing is one of the areas that most people are interested in, so that implementation can more easily be achieved.

Question/Comment: I know that it was a pretty sizeable grant to do this study so I would assume that those entities that helped write that grant would not want to see that it doesn't get implemented. So I don't know are those organizations drafting grants or finding ways to do the implementation I think it's important that technical assistance is vastly needed. I don't know if it's this in vision tomorrow website where you can learn about what other communities are doing for implementation if that is get that out and we would love to engage to have another meeting in Ashtabula to roll it out. You said you didn't have enough time to talk about the details I would like to see the details

S.M: Please go to the website of VibrantNEO.org the envision tomorrow is the scenario planning software that was used but we do have a lot of information there the draft with the additional detail on the recommendations and sub set recommendation strategies is in there as well it's continuing to be refined we would be happy to come out and talk with you more in terms of additional funding those are things that we are trying to do with the board. I think there is a strong desire to keep the organization together and there are things that we are also doing trying to figure out what is within our scope our board organization scope that they can do differently to help implement. What can we integrate into our annual work programs that could help implement pieces of this?

Question/Comment: I was just wondering did you receive input from individuals from all walks of life because I have a hard time believing that the extremely impoverished or moderately impoverished would accept something of this nature. Because I know for a fact that Ashtabula County alone has hundreds upon hundreds of individuals who are below the poverty line extremely and Ashtabula does nothing but promote even more poverty with these cash advance places popping up on every corner and dollar stores and places like that so I just have a hard time that they would agree to something of this nature say they would have to increase tax dollars in some way to pay for it.

S.M: We know that in having meetings like this you get people who can actually make it to the meetings so we want to make sure that we are as thorough as we possibly could be we did 3 major rounds of engagement moving around to different areas around the 12 county footprint. We did two statistically balanced surveys, public opinion polling with a firm that specializes in that to get a sampling of what our peoples values across different gender, income, all the different demographics to make sure that we weren't slanted to much in one direction so we tried to normalize the results that way. The Imagine My NEO tool was an online feedback forum so that people that couldn't get to meetings had another opportunity. We did try to get out to as many different groups of people as possible. I don't even know how many meetings the staff has been to. It's probably in the hundreds over the last couple of years, so we did try to reach out as best that we could.

Question/Comment: I've been in this county since 2006 and I didn't hear about you guys until 3 months ago. To follow up what she said I've been here since the early 90's and I've never heard about you at all until the other day when I was researching something else and found this by accident. I don't know what your outreach program is but it's not reaching everywhere.

J.G: Just want to comment on following up on what Sarah said about trying to get the word out there with all of the meetings they had. We've done press releases we've met with the press, we've met with all three editorial boards of the major newspapers in the three counties trying to get the word out. A lot of that is because that's how newspapers work, it's not bad news so it doesn't get in the paper if it's good news it doesn't. We think we've made an honest attempt to try to get the word out to everyone. Again all the meetings, all the public meetings, all of the press notices our elected officials in the Ashtabula and Trumbull county board have been informed of this for the past 3 years. I'm just telling you what we do.

Question/Comment: The overall implementation of this is going to cost money. The benefits seem to be accruing to the inner city urban areas, revitalization, bringing people back, into the cities, infrastructure investment. Those of us who don't have that who are in rural areas we're not seeing the benefit. There's no mass transportation there's no investment coming out to improve our towns and stuff like that. So it seems like everybody is going to share equally in the cost but yet, that money is going to be going to the urban areas and basically going away from the rural areas. Am I misinterpreting this? Assuming you implemented the entire plan regional wise am I seeing that correctly?

J.G: No, I think we demonstrated and directed that all areas will be covered you're look at green space, you're looking at protecting water resources, you're looking at protecting our lands. We're looking into conserving land out there it's all a part of what we're trying to do. The major emphasis we've got from the input from the people we talked is to look at the legacy cities and to keep the development in the major cities and those areas the urbanized areas. That doesn't mean that we're not going to do anything out in the rural areas. You said you don't want any roads or highways out there and now you want them. Again there is going to be a lot of financing alternatives to do a lot of this stuff we got to look at.

P.V: I think part of it sir, and it's all a matter of personal perspective. I believe in the freedom we have as individuals and as Americans. I also believe that with freedom comes responsibility, with our rights comes responsibility other wise it would be chaos. We would be like the chaotic other places that we see across the ocean and I don't think any of us want that. We must have some order and that's why we have government, sometimes the government is totally dysfunctional, but the only way to change that is to get involved and that's why we're is here to get involved. Relative to the distribution of our public dollars, our wealth, our accumulated wealth as a country, the taxes we pay. As John said the intent here isn't to alienate any part of the region or any community in the region. At the same time there is a limited amount of resources and a lot of this is to try. People have told us, it isn't his idea, or my idea, or Sara's idea. People have told us that you should put as much of the resources as you can where it serves the most people. The urban areas are where most people live it's more compact and there's more to be fixed, there's more broken, there's more devastation, there's more poor people. We've had meetings in Lorain, we've had meetings in Cleveland, we've had meetings in Canton, and we've had meets in Akron. They have been attended by people that are impoverished. We've seen kids, there wasn't a kid in this room tonight. We've had meetings where people have brought their children because they wanted to be here and because they had nobody to take care of their kids. They sat there the whole night and ate potato chips and cookies while the parents sat here and listened and asked questions. What we've heard and what they've told us over the last year is that when you invest in cities, established places, whether they're small towns or big cities like Akron, you're investing in our neighborhoods because that's where we live. We need housing we need roads. With density and population comes safety. There's an old philosophy about eyes on the street that we experienced and abandoned neighborhoods

are the most unsafe. So we're trying to listen, trying to get the word out, but the only other thing I'll tell you is that there are people that don't know and it's really hard to spread this word, but there's also a whole lot of people that don't care. Whether they are rich or poor they just don't care and there's nothing we can do about that.