



AIA150 Blue Print for America
Greener Greenbelt Initiative

Summary of Initiative

Design matters! The buildings, neighborhoods, and communities we shape as architects shape the lives of those who live, work and play in them!

AIA 150 Blue Print for America

2007 marks the 150th anniversary of the founding of the American Institute of Architects. Nationally, the AIA is committed to celebrating this amazing milestone in ways that will resonate well beyond 2007 through a program called the AIA150 Blue Print for America. Blue Print for America has been envisioned as a way to address the lack of recognition and understanding of the architect's role by providing opportunities for architects to engage directly and broadly with their communities.

AIA•PV Greener Greenbelt Initiative

AIA•PV has joined the Blue Print for America program by undertaking an "initiative" in the New Deal-era planned community of Greenbelt, Maryland. The goal of the initiative is to help Greenbelt define a pathway to become a sustainable community tomorrow while retaining those qualities that make it special today.

In partnership with Greenbelt Homes, Inc. (GHI), the cooperative which represents the residents of most of "Old" Greenbelt's more than 1600 dwellings, AIA•PV has received a grant of \$15,000 from AIA150 for the "Greener Greenbelt Initiative". GHI is committed to matching the AIA150 grant dollar for dollar.

Greener Greenbelt Community Design Charrette

With these and other resources in place, AIA•PV is actively preparing a community "visioning" process for Old Greenbelt to be conducted during the summer and fall of 2007. The central piece of the visioning process will be a multi-day "charrette" where AIA•PV members will work side-by-side with professional partners from other fields and community stakeholders. The fundamental goal of this visioning is to help target GHI's capital and operations expenditures over the next 30 years, leading to Greenbelt's 100th anniversary in 2037.

The Greener Greenbelt Initiative will address community development issues across four broad topic areas: preservation, affordability, livability and sustainability. The scale of issues will range from individual dwelling units to multi-dwelling residential buildings, commercial buildings, multi-building blocks, neighborhoods, and even the entire town in its regional context.

“Old” Greenbelt – A Green Town circa 1937

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the historic center of Greenbelt, Maryland, is a New Deal era town built to serve as a national model for creating livable and affordable communities. A mix of art deco townhouse clusters and garden apartments radiate from the recreational, civic and commercial town center.

Celebrating its 70th anniversary in 2007, Greenbelt faces significant challenges to maintain both its livability and affordability. These challenges impact the entire Greenbelt community, the historic town center, each neighborhood and cluster, and even individual buildings and residential units. A comprehensive approach is needed to reestablish the idealism on which Greenbelt was founded and to define a future that will sustain Greenbelt as a livable and affordable community.

Greener Greenbelt Guiding Principles

Preservation – As a model of New Deal era ideals, Greenbelt was heralded for the revolutionary concepts of the town plan, the quality and scope of its open spaces, the forward-looking expression of its architecture, and the commodiousness of its modest dwellings. There is a growing commitment to reclaiming those qualities that make Greenbelt a special place.

Livability – Today, Greenbelt is wedged within the National Capital region. While regional opportunities increase exponentially, keeping “Old” Greenbelt viable becomes increasingly difficult. Redefining the role of the local community and neighborhoods within the structure of a megalopolis will determine Greenbelt’s livability into the future.

Affordability – At the height of the Great Depression, Greenbelt was built to provide middle-income families an affordable place to live. With development intensifying throughout the metropolitan region, Greenbelt is becoming expensive. What strategies can help to retain the modest character of Greenbelt’s townhouse clusters despite rising property values and tax rates?

Sustainability – Matching the optimism and idealism that created Greenbelt, many of today’s residents believe fervently that sustainability will help meet the challenges of preservation, livability and affordability, as well as environmental stewardship. Sustainability serves as one of the core values of the Greener Greenbelt Initiative.

Greener Greenbelt Revitalization Challenges

Upgrading the Dwelling Units – The original apartments, commercial and civic buildings, and townhouse clusters in Old Greenbelt were constructed between 1935 and 1940. The Initiative will recommend ways to improve building performance.

Expanding the Dwelling Units – Greenbelt’s planners placed a strong emphasis on attracting families. The Initiative will study strategies so that Greenbelt can continue to be an affordable, livable community for families.

Restoring the “Super Blocks” – In Greenbelt’s “garden city” plan, townhouse clusters were assembled into “super blocks” with extensive communal landscapes. The Initiative will study ways to restore the landscape character of the super blocks.

Establishing Preservation Guidelines – To this day, Old Greenbelt struggles with apprehension about what being an historic community means for maintenance and alteration of buildings and grounds. The Initiative will focus on historic preservation as an important factor in determining both the livability and sustainability of the community.

Envisioning a Greener Greenbelt – Parallels exist between the ideals that created Greenbelt during the Great Depression and today's efforts to seek a sustainable path through the malaise of intensifying global environmental alarm. The Initiative embraces Greenbelt's sustainability ethic and will facilitate efforts to envision a sustainable future.

Livable Communities Issues in Greener Greenbelt

Design on a human scale – Following Clarence Stein's garden city ideas, Greenbelt establishes a suburban approach to walkability. The Initiative will preserve walkability and study approaches to improve connectivity.

Provide choices – Old Greenbelt offers a wide spectrum of housing choices. The Initiative will recommend actions to maintain the affordability of housing while expanding housing choices.

Encourage mixed-use development – The viability of Old Greenbelt's mixed-use Town Center has been challenged. The Initiative will explore approaches to reinvigorating the Town Center.

Preserve urban centers – The Initiative is focused on preserving a historically significant planned community. It will illustrate how suburban communities can be transformed into sustainable communities.

Vary transportation options – Old Greenbelt is well-served by transit. Improving public transit options to access community resources will be addressed in the Initiative.

Build vibrant public spaces – The Town Center was created as a vibrant public space that belongs to everyone. Preserving the character of the Town Center and restoring its vibrancy will be addressed.

Create neighborhood identity – Seventy years of use and change have eroded the character of the New Deal era town. The Initiative will study ways to restore the character of Old Greenbelt while transforming it to a model of sustainability.

Protect environmental resources – The foremost guiding principle of Greenbelt's planning was to bring people into closer contact with nature. The Initiative seeks to update the relationship between the town and natural environment.

Conserve landscapes – Recapturing the character and accessibility of the landscaped commons within the residential super blocks is an important goal of the Greener Greenbelt Initiative.

Design matters – Design matters could well have been the mantra of Greenbelt's creators. Restoring its architectural character is understood as a step in reinvigorating Greenbelt's community spirit. Designing a sustainable community is understood as essential in securing its value for future generations.

Greener Greenbelt Focus on Sustainability

For architects truly concerned with the sustainable use of the building stock, the maintenance and revitalization of existing communities must be understood as the greatest challenge facing the next generation. Finding sustainable and practical solutions to retain these resources while at the same time dramatically improving them is going to take a great deal of work.

Since issues addressed by the Initiative will range in scale from individual buildings to community-wide conditions, opportunities to improve energy performance and reduce environmental impacts

are many. Renewable energy opportunities include solar, wind, ground-source and water-source heating and cooling. Water quality improvements may include rainwater harvesting building-by-building, transforming greenswards using low-impact development methods, green roofs on dozens of buildings, and controlling run-off into Greenbelt Lake.

There are many opportunities to integrate sustainable design practices to upgrade the building stock in Old Greenbelt. Building envelope performance must be addressed in ways that both improve energy efficiency and preserve the character of the architecture. Improving the energy performance of lighting, electrical systems, and heating and cooling systems can bear substantial returns. By retaining what is valuable and retrofitting when necessary, Old Greenbelt can become a model green community.

GHI's cooperative association structure is an expression of consensus-based governance on a large scale. It allows AIA•PV and the community to work in the most direct partnership possible. Recently, increasing emphasis is being placed on the social and economic corners of the sustainability triangle. The Greener Greenbelt Initiative can serve as a model for other communities who seek to redefine themselves through sustainability.

Volunteer Opportunities

Preparing for and conducting the Greener Greenbelt community visioning process, and especially the design charrette, will require the coordinated collaboration of dozens of people. The community in Greenbelt, particularly the GHI cooperative, is actively engaged in getting ready for the charrette. A "steering committee" comprised of both AIA•PV and GHI members has been organized and is proceeding rapidly with assembling the resources for the Greener Greenbelt Initiative. A strong bond between AIA•PV and the greenbelt community has already been forged. It is time for AIA•PV to draw upon the capabilities of our membership in partnership with affiliated planning and design professionals and the Greenbelt community. It is time to get involved. It is time to get busy.

Working Groups

Four "working groups" have been organized:

- charrette planning
- outreach & stakeholders
- communications
- baseline & benchmark information

Each working group needs participants from both the Greenbelt community and AIA•PV. Most urgently, AIA•PV needs volunteers to help provide professional assistance for each of the four working groups. Volunteers should be available to attend some of the GGI Steering Committee meetings (held on the first Tuesday of each month) and participate in one monthly working group meeting / conference call.

Please contact Lloyd Unsell, Hon. AIA, Executive Director of AIA•PV, at lloyd@aiapvc.org, to volunteer or to find out more.

Greener Greenbelt Schedule

Greener Greenbelt activities in the Greenbelt community will begin in May 2007, culminating in a multi-day design charrette in October 2007. Follow-up activities will continue into the early months of 2008. Come be a part of something really challenging and exciting! Help create a Greener Greenbelt!