



Written Statement for the Record

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Land-of-Sky Regional Council and
Board Member of the
National Association of Development Organizations
(NADO)**

**Before the
United States Senate
Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs**

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Thank you, Chairman Dodd, Ranking Member Shelby, and members of the committee, for the opportunity to testify today to share our region's perspective on the Livable Communities Act and the need to better integrate housing, community development, transportation, and sustainable development policies.

My name is Joe McKinney. I serve as Executive Director of the **Land-of-Sky Regional Council**, a regional planning and development organization serving 19 communities in Western North Carolina. Our four county region has a population of approximately 385,000, anchored by our largest city, Asheville, with a population of 78,000. My organization is a member of the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) and I currently serve on the NADO board of directors.

The **National Association of Development Organizations (NADO)** provides advocacy, education, research and training for the national network of 520 regional development organizations. NADO members—known locally as councils of governments, economic development districts, local development districts, planning and development districts, regional councils and regional planning commissions—are focused on strengthening local governments, communities and economies through regional collaboration, comprehensive development strategies and program implementation.

Our nation's regional development organizations manage and deliver a variety of federal and state programs. Based on local needs and priorities, programs may include aging, census, community and economic development, emergency management and homeland security preparedness, GIS, housing, small business development finance, transportation and workforce

development. A policy board of local elected officials, along with business, education and citizen representatives, governs and sets the priorities for each regional organization.

NADO and its members fully support the Livable Communities Act and appreciate the indispensable role the legislation outlines for regional councils in coordinating and administering sustainable development planning and implementation activities with our local governments along with business, community and civic leaders. We encourage the committee to retain the legislation's focus on supporting and incentivizing the development and implementation of regional strategies that are regionally-focused and locally-controlled on a voluntary basis.

We want to strongly avoid federal mandates and requirements on regional and local planning, yet also provide the incentives, tools, ideas and program framework to reward and encourage regional planning and development that links community and economic development, housing, and transportation in a more strategic and sustainable manner.

Despite being a predominantly rural community, our region's leadership has been actively involved in comprehensive planning for many years. With an economy heavily influenced by tourism, the Asheville region has focused on sustaining our communities' assets while continuing to provide economic opportunities for our residents. In my testimony today, I will offer examples of how the Livable Communities Act can support our regional and local initiatives, as well as similar efforts across rural America.

Mr. Chairman, to give you a better understanding of who I represent, it is important to point out that our organization has been in existence since 1966 and is led by local elected officials –

mayors and county commissioners – as well as representatives from the private sector and minority communities.

Land-of-Sky Regional Council's mission, as adopted by the board of directors, is to foster desirable social, economic, cultural, and ecological conditions in our four-county area. The work of the organization is supported through a variety of funding sources, including local, state, federal, and private investment dollars.

Specific program services provided to the region's communities include economic and community development planning, environmental planning and implementation, regional transportation planning, housing, land use planning, and aging planning and service delivery.

I would like to highlight four specific program areas that I feel are relevant to the Livable Communities Act and provide you with some background on how our small metropolitan and rural communities are already planning for the implementation of this legislation.

First, Mr. Chairman, within the transportation arena, the Land-of-Sky Regional Council serves as the primary planning agency for both the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and the Rural Planning Organization (RPO) in Western North Carolina. These entities are partnerships between local and state governments that make strategic transportation planning decisions in urban and rural areas and fulfill the planning requirements established by federal and state authorizing legislation.

Essentially, our organization is where the “rubber meets the road” in terms of making local decisions on which roads are built or improved, what alternative transportation options are available, and how we work together as a region to be more self-sustaining with regard to fuel production and consumption.

Our organization is currently in the process of developing a Long-Range Transportation Plan that will incorporate the livability principles set forth in this legislation. This includes increasing transportation choices for our citizens while protecting and developing our environmental assets which are important to our mountain communities.

Second, Mr. Chairman, I believe our Waste Reduction Partners program fits perfectly within the principles set forth in the Livable Communities Act. This program, which has been in existence for 18 years, utilizes highly experienced volunteer and retired engineers and scientists to provide our businesses, industries and institutions (both public and private) with waste, water, and energy reduction assessments and technical assistance.

This specific program has had an amazing impact on the region’s quality of life, including total utility savings costs of more than \$23 million and a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions of more than 125,000 tons. The program has resulted in more than 600 million gallons of water conserved and 200,000 tons of solid waste reduced in North Carolina.

The Waste Reduction Partners program already embraces essential principles of sustainability by enhancing our businesses and industries’ economic competitiveness while preserving and protecting the beautiful Asheville and surround region’s environment.

Third, Mr. Chairman, the Livable Communities Act can have significant impact on ongoing

brownfields redevelopment in rural areas. Brownfield sites are abandoned or underused industrial and commercial facilities available for re-use. Expansion or redevelopment of such a facility may be complicated by real or perceived environmental contaminations. In 2002, Land-of-Sky Regional Council became one of the first organizations in a rural area to address brownfields on a regional basis.

In less than eight years, our organization, in partnership with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), has helped turn more than 20 abandoned properties with real or perceived environmental impairment into vibrant, working and productive properties.

Since 1992, EPA has invested more than \$3.5 million in the Asheville region to help our rural communities address environmental challenges and support our region's economy. The Regional Brownfields Initiative helped transform a vacant mica plant in Asheville into 10 affordable residential loft spaces.

Earlier this year, our region was selected as one of 21 communities nationwide to receive an EPA Climate Showcase Communities grant. With this funding, the "Reading, Riding, Retrofit" program is improving energy efficiency in school buildings and identify alternative transportation choices, it will use "Green Teams" of students, teachers and parents to develop an educational program to promote sustainability as an ethic in our school children.

EPA's support of our region's growing green economy and is an excellent example of how the

Livable Communities Act can further enhance our efforts to undertake school-based sustainability projects, promote transportation choices and energy efficiency retrofits.

Fourth, Mr. Chairman, the Economic Development Administration's (EDA) support of our locally-developed and regionally-focused economic development planning process has helped connect our area's job creation strategies with fundamental principles for sustainable development.

In 2007, with funding from EDA, our region's leadership developed a comprehensive economic development strategy. The strategy identified key challenges to our economy and set a course for our region's future development. Key areas identified in the strategy include:

- Quality, affordable workforce housing
- Transportation and air quality
- Reuse and redevelopment
- Regional growth management planning
- Clean energy planning
- Entrepreneurship

In response to the Livable Communities Act, our region's leadership modified this guiding document to combine our six livability principles with our adopted economic development strategies. Our 19 local governments, led by the Land-of-Sky Regional Council and the City of Asheville, have joined forces with the region's chambers of commerce, private foundations and non-profits to initiate the Western North Carolina Livable Communities Initiative.

Further, in Asheville our local governmental and regional leaders are currently in the process of meeting with representatives from HUD, DOT, EPA and five other federal government agencies to begin working together to implement the sustainable goals that have been embraced by our region. Funding provided by the Livable Communities Act is essential to helping our region and other smaller metropolitan and rural communities across America provide a bright future for our residents and visitors.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I would offer that the principles of sustainability and livability can be defined in many ways. In Western North Carolina, we are the proud home of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians. In their culture, the number seven is a sacred and honored number. The Cherokee Nation describes sustainability as planning and acting in a way to honor and respect the next seven generations. We believe that this legislation is critical in helping honor and respect future generations in Western North Carolina's rural communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of this important legislation. I welcome any questions or comments.