

# Platform

## President's Corner

By JOHN ROBERT SMITH  
PRESIDENT AND CEO

Reconnecting America recently completed *Are We There Yet?*, a project that established benchmarks against which regions across America can be measured. Allison Brooks offers an overview of the report and all that went into it.



Part of getting there – complete communities – involves our unique tools to help communities sort the implementation needs of transit communities. Abby Thorne-Lyman and Chris Yake explain this in “People + Places = Possibility.”

Much of this work would benefit from support in Congress. The transportation bill passed in June had positive points, but, by omission, some negatives. Sarah Kline explains the outcome of the wrangling in “What MAP-21 Means for Complete Communities.”

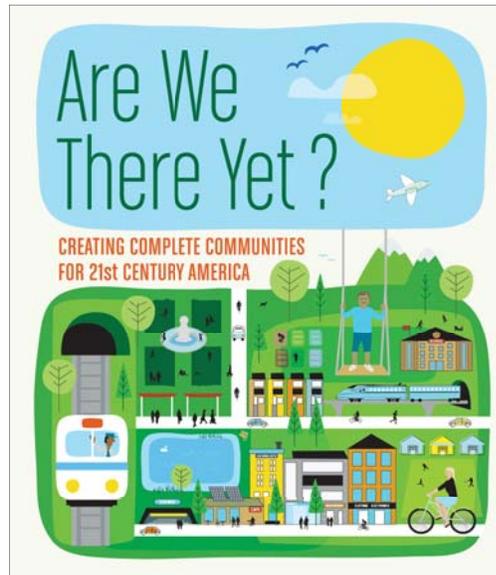
## Complete Communities for the 21st Century

By ALLISON BROOKS  
CHIEF OF STAFF

America is in a period of transition, pushed forward by changing demographics – a rapidly aging population, an increasing number of single-person and single-parent households – and a changing economy. If manifest destiny drove America’s ever-outward expansion, facilitated first by wagons and railroads and then by highways and suburban tracts of single-family homes in the last century, the younger generation and boomers alike are driven by a need to return to the city center in the 21st century, redeveloping older communities to make them more complete,

and making our economy more resilient and sustainable by doing things more efficiently across our regions.

To that end, we at Reconnecting America have launched a new report that calls for, and contributes to, the development of a national shared vision for creating complete communities and strong regional economies that are well positioned to succeed in the changing demands of the 21st century.



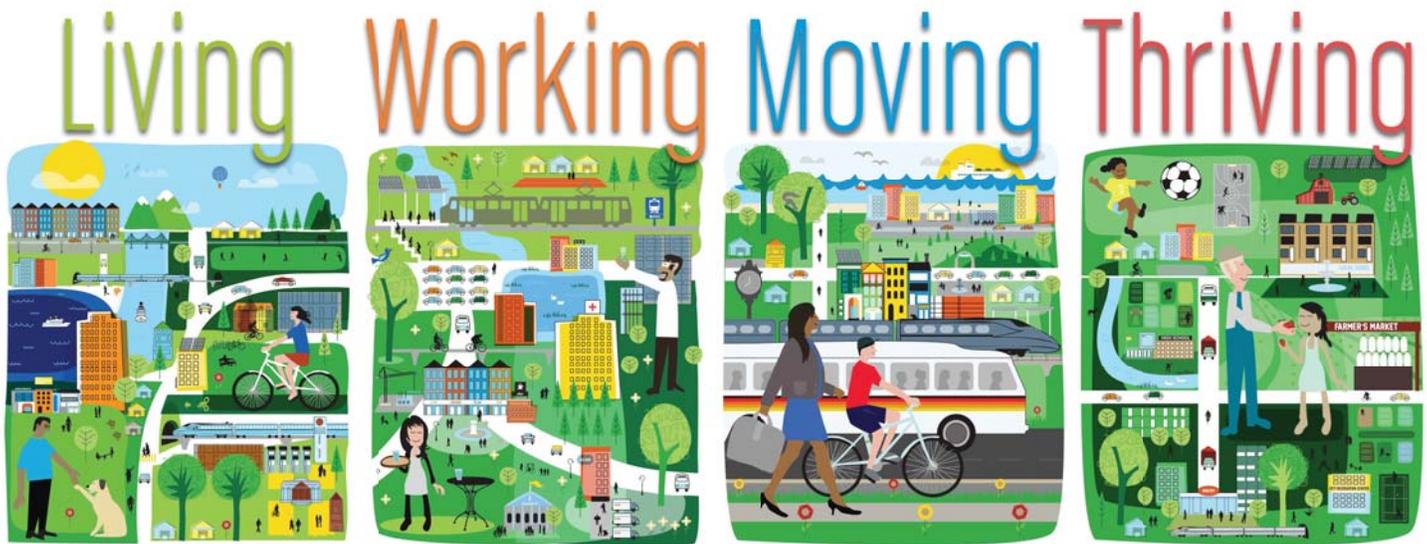
*Are We There Yet? Creating Complete Communities for 21st Century America* lays out some fundamentals of daily life – how we live, how we move,

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## Are We There Yet? . . .

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how we work and how we thrive as individuals, as families, and as a part of communities. We have collected and analyzed data to develop original metrics and studied those of others to come up with an analysis that can help leaders in cities and regions track how close they are to “there.”

At Reconnecting America we believe that when communities – urban, suburban or rural – offer what people need, we begin to get closer to “there.” We see higher high school graduation rates, reduced rates of obesity and diabetes, and reduced traffic congestion and cleaner air. We see more people walking, biking and engaging in their communities, and we see a reduction in crime. Our children live in safe and affordable housing, and we see citizens getting active in the democratic process and the creation of civic environments that foster more economic activity and jobs – all of which gives the U.S. an economic competitive advantage.

Some of these are measurable outcomes; some we only know when we experience them.

*Are We There Yet?* contains some key features

that we want to highlight:

First, we are introducing two new terms. We envision creating “complete communities” across the country, places where people can live, work, move and thrive in a healthier, more equitable, and more economically competitive way. We also write about “opportunity areas,” which are the places within our cities and regions where we can get a jump on this vision.

Second, Reconnecting America has collected data to help all of us understand the existing conditions of our regions and to track progress at the regional level in all 366 Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) in the country. A lot of work is underway by different organizations to measure progress at the neighborhood or even development scale. We believe regional measures can be very useful in capturing and compiling the impact of neighborhood change on regional performance. Though complete communities exist on a neighborhood scale, the benefits of complete communities are regional, producing better air quality, less congestion, lower obesity rates, reduced poverty, job growth – the list continues. Ultimately, efforts to improve individual neighborhoods must “trickle up” to change regional performance, or

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we're not making a dent in the performance of our regions.

Third, we have graded each of the 366 metro areas based on how they measure up to our vision, with metro areas being graded on a curve against metro areas of a similar size. For instance, Altoona, Pennsylvania, is not measured against New York City, but against regions of similar size.

Finally, *Are We There Yet?* describes real-life examples we have collected — and in some instances that we have experienced first-hand — of leadership, innovation and collaboration occurring in all sorts of places and by all kinds of people. From Oklahoma City to Des Moines to Seattle, we have compiled stories that illustrate forward thinking with tangible outcomes — getting people to work, reducing obesity and engaging in a productive civic dialogue.

In our development of the metrics, we experienced ongoing challenges in accessing consistent and reliable data to measure progress across cities and regions. While we believe that the information presented in this report is the best that is available today, we also believe it would advance our efforts to build complete communities if we could work with other organizations to develop a shared national data set to track progress at the regional level and at other appropriate levels. By tracking this data over time, we can identify the best practices and strategies that help places improve their performance, and we can identify those sure-fire investments that produce better outcomes.

Reconnecting America will be distributing a limited amount of hard copies of the report at conferences and upon request. It can also be downloaded from our website, where you will also find more stories and more data than we could include in the report.

For more information, we encourage you to visit [ReconnectingAmerica.org/arewethereyet](http://ReconnectingAmerica.org/arewethereyet).

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erous support we received from the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), the Ford Foundation and the Surdna Foundation to complete this report. 

## People + Places . . .

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transit or other investments to change market strength. Whereas the Places approach combines its variables into an index, CTOD's People approach suggests evaluating each of these variables independently and seeing how they relate to one another in order to understand susceptibility to change.

In the Puget Sound region, the People approach also incorporates opportunity mapping completed by Ohio State University's Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in support of the region's Growing Transit Communities HUD regional planning grant initiative. Puget Sound stakeholders will be able to overlay the information described above with measurements of the health, education and employment opportunities found in each community.

## IMPLEMENTATION

Ultimately, this approach helps cities or regions strategically identify the broad implementation needs of a transit community, without breaking the bank on costly station area plans. This systemwide approach informs and sets the table for local planning and implementation efforts. It allows regions to “do more with less” by targeting funding for places that can truly benefit from investments; coordinating across the public, private and philanthropic sectors; and prioritizing activities that can best capture the untapped value of transit. In the long term, this systematic approach will foster critical conversations about the policy priorities and programmatic changes needed at the state, regional, citywide and community scales. 