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GSA's Triple Bottom Line Hillary Altman

As the nation's largest public real estate organization, the U.S. General Services Administration faces three stiff challenges. They are the ABCs that guide us: agency, business and community needs.

The first challenge, which is our mission, is to meet the real-estate requirements of federal agencies, our customers. Our activities support more than one million federal workers located in some 1,600 communities throughout the country.

The second, which is our responsibility to the American taxpayer, is to manage our five billion-dollar real-estate business effectively within our existing, and often limited, authorities.

The third, which is our civic duty, is to be good neighbors in the communities where we have a presence. We are well aware of how federal development can help or, frankly, hinder local revitalization efforts.

The most daunting task of all is striking a day-to-day balance among these three often competing, yet critical, commitments. They are, in effect, our triple bottom line.

To begin to tackle that, GSA's Center for Urban Development recently hosted the "GSA Federal Buildings: Tools for Community Investment" forum at the Brookings Institution. The forum examined current real-estate trends and development patterns and considered how, in light of those circumstances, GSA can best use its assets to meet its challenges.

Our group of GSA leadership, national urban experts and members of the Congress for the New Urbanism generated ideas to help us shape future practices. In particular, we have introduced six "Good Neighbor" guiding principles. First, we want to make strategic decisions about where we locate in metropolitan regions, paying special attention to implementing executive orders that require federal agencies to locate in or next to

central business areas, particularly in historic buildings. The other principles are to promote community involvement and partnerships, offer transportation alternatives, seek ways to leverage investment, promote mixed-use, live-work-play, twenty-four-hour cities, and consider the effect of technology on space needs.

Living up to these principles is paramount for us as we try to "practice our ABCs" on the projects we undertake every day. The Center for Urban Development's approach is to take on projects one by one, in collaboration with communities, allowing them to evolve as incubators of new ideas that could ultimately help shift our larger patterns of decisionmaking. We currently have some twenty projects under way around the country, each setting a unique example, each embodying the "Good Neighbor" guiding principles, each resulting in better, more vital places.

One of our first opportunities to apply the Good Neighbor principles was in Washington, D.C., this May. The Center helped GSA's National Capital Region and the city assemble a team of national and community experts who looked at how the re-use of a large federal parcel could help jump-start development of a vibrant, new urban waterfront neighborhood. We were able to introduce tools and generate ideas that have already begun to take hold. We hope these new ideas can intensify, set an example and cut across narrow agency, business and community interests.

Hillary Altman is Director of the Center for Urban Development, U.S. General Services Administration.



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