

Sunshine State organizes CNU regional chapter

Florida is first, others will follow, according to John Norquist.

For CNU members, the annual Congress is a powerful experience. They get exposed to a range of successful new urbanist projects. They learn from leaders in the fields of urban planning, architecture, development and government. And they interact with hundreds of talented people who share their commitment to shaping communities into better places.

Members return home with renewed enthusiasm, but those in Florida will soon have something more — a way to stay connected and extend elements of the Congress experience throughout the year.

This summer, Florida became home to the CNU's first registered Chapter Organizing Committee. The 29-member-and-growing group will now commit itself to creating CNU's first chapter, which it envisions as an efficient vehicle for networking, sharing knowledge, and influencing policies and practices across the state. Even at this intermediate stage, the experience of CNU members in Florida promises to serve as an example and inspiration to groups of members in other regions.

CHAPTER GENESIS

The idea of a Florida chapter first surfaced in the organizational meetings for CNU X in Miami in 2002. CNU board members Jim Murley and Lizz Plater-Zyberk chaired the Local Organizing Group. "We could see a great deal of pent-up interest from the Florida members to do things together, to learn what is working, and to help the national organization grow and prosper," says Murley, director of the Catanese Center for Urban and Environmental Solutions at Florida Atlantic University and former secretary of Florida's Department of Community Affairs.

Florida figured to be fertile ground for CNU's first shot at chapter organizing. The state has experienced almost nonstop growth since the late 1970s and dizzying sprawl. That growth pressure exposed the need for alternatives and the state government stepped forward with growth management regulations tied to the private sector, says Plater-Zyberk. With a strong beachhead in the

Florida, home to early new urban successes like Abacoa, is again leading the way in organizing CNU's first regional chapter.



state, new urbanists were well-positioned to provide leadership. The movement has a distinguished history in the state, starting with Seaside, which began construction in 1984. "We now have 60-plus new urbanist projects that you can touch, feel and smell," says Murley, one of four CNU board members — along with Robert Davis, Andres Duany and Lizz Plater-Zyberk — whose high-profile leadership has energized many Floridians.

Chapter organizers say the creation of a CNU X conference publication, *A Guidebook to New Urbanism in Florida*, served as a direct impetus for chapter formation by identifying the state's depth of experience with traditional urban projects and a sense of community among Florida new urbanists. "It got people excited," says Jean Scott, a new urbanist and senior fellow at the Catanese Institute who served as the book's editor. "They were able to see the breadth of projects — from early pacesetters like Seaside to smaller urban infill and mixed-use redevelopment projects and a number of Hope VI public housing projects."

HANDBOOK SHOWS HOW

With parallel discussions occurring at the CNU Board about the benefits of chapter development, Murley saw an opportunity to take action. "I finally said, 'Let's stop talking and let's do a [chapter] guidebook.' And we hired Jean to do it."

Created in close cooperation with CNU staff and board members, this *Chapter Handbook* now serves as a blueprint for chapter formation in Florida and around the country. It lays out a three-step process which a group fol-

lows to become a full-fledged chapter.

The Florida group achieved the first step this summer, formation of the Chapter Organizing Committee. The committee signed up 29 founding chapter members and raised more than \$25,000 to support its efforts. It has identified chapter activities ranging from coordinating regional events and hosting a web site (www.cnuflorida.org) to updating the *Guidebook to New Urbanism in Florida*. Murley expects to call together the committee later this year to determine dues, create a list of events, and begin drafting bylaws and planning an annual budget, all steps toward becoming a provisional chapter.

When they sent out initial letters to Florida CNU members, organizers received an immediate flurry of unsolicited e-mail messages. The response showed how hungry CNU Floridians are for more networking opportunities. "With chapters, CNU members will have opportunities outside the annual Congress to interact with peers and to work with them to influence the policies and regulations that provide the context for new urbanist projects," says Scott.

Scott and other organizers believe that chapter-level education efforts will have special value because they will reflect local and regional influences.

Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist, the incoming CEO of CNU, agrees. "I expect chapters to accelerate and advance the work of the Congress. CNU's strategies need to be tailored to fit different regions. Chapters will lead that effort." ♦

For more information on chapter formation, please e-mail egreenberg@cnu.org.