



Protect Our Community Redevelopment Agencies

By Christopher Keller, urban designer/landscape architect for HNTB Corp. in Lake Mary, Fla.

Applying local funds to solve local issues — isn't that what it is all about? That is the formula under which community redevelopment agencies operate. It is efficient and extremely effective. Unfortunately, Florida legislators are considering limiting the effectiveness, or in some instances, calling for the elimination of CRAs altogether.

CRAs are incredibly successful tools for breathing new life into communities that are in need of revitalization. Their purpose is to eradicate physical blight in its many forms and elicit renewed interest and vitality within the district. This is achieved through local leadership and the preparation of a publicly vetted redevelopment plan. There are no state or federal monies spent by CRAs. Revenues used by CRAs come from future property value increases in the area — called "increment" because they are incremental increases in taxable values. The often slow but steady rebirth of a neighborhood, commercial area or community is guided by the constituents of the area through the CRA plan, budget and hearings.

Unlike improvements carried out by county agencies using general funds, CRA increment funds are generated and spent locally within the community redevelopment area. A redevelopment plan is created by the community, and projects are implemented according to that public plan. CRAs are uniquely designed to address that area's specific needs for revitalization.

Conversely, transportation funds are generated by local gas taxes, returned to the federal government, reapportioned to the states and administered by regional transportation agencies. Thus, they are not necessarily spent where they are generated. This is a circuitous, expensive and often inequitable way to attempt to solve local transportation problems.

Public oversight of CRAs is built-in. There are five annual reports required of CRAs on their activities, finances and administration, and all monthly board meetings are open to the public.

CRAs are vitally important to job creation. Many developers will not even consider investing in the redevelopment of blighted properties if the local government has not demonstrated efforts to address failing infrastructure or visual blight. By providing or improving sanitary sewers, redeveloping streetscapes or fixing traffic problems, CRAs provide this "priming of the pump," which often encourages developers to redevelop neglected properties. All these activities create jobs.

CRAs also are key components in the revitalization of communities across Florida. Many CRAs organize and provide financial support to festivals or street parties, which support local businesses. These activities have proved successful in developing public pride and participation in community events. It is clear that redevelopment works.

However, CRAs are currently under attack by legislation under consideration in the 2018 legislative session. These local agencies must be left intact to continue improving our communities. To ensure forward movement, and not regressive policy development, I encourage Orlando-area citizens to call on lawmakers to protect our CRAs.

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The Redevelopment Works campaign, spearheaded by the Florida Redevelopment Association (FRA), is raising awareness about the importance of Florida's community redevelopment agencies (CRAs), which serve to revitalize communities. For additional information, please visit redevelopment.net/redevelopment-works.