

GSA Good Neighbor Program to Strengthen Cities

The U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) is working to invigorate the economic and civic life of the nation's communities. Through its real estate services, GSA is building public/private partnerships that leverage community investment, economic development, and urban revitalization. The agency's approach is to be a "good neighbor," treating federal properties as building blocks in local communities. The results are projects that foster a sense of place and civic pride and strengthen neighborhoods.

GSA launched its Good Neighbor program last fall by announcing partnerships with several national organizations, including the International Downtown Association and the National Council for Urban and Economic Development. Since then, GSA has agreed to work with more than 50 downtown organizations and cities, including Atlanta, Baltimore, Birmingham, Fort Worth, Memphis, Phoenix, Portland, Seattle, Tampa, and Washington, D.C. "Through these efforts, we are building partnerships with local communities to bring out the best in government," states David J. Barram, GSA's acting administrator.

In the last five years, GSA has provided more than \$280 million in surplus federal property for public use, much of it in empowerment zones and enterprise communities. GSA, along with other federal agencies, carries out President Clinton's executive orders to locate federal workers in central business areas and downtown historic buildings and districts. With a portfolio among the largest in the United States, GSA controls more than 1 million square feet of space in each of 40 U.S. cities. Nationwide, it controls almost 300 million square feet of office space in more than 8,000 buildings, providing work environments for more than 1 million federal employees.

Robert Peck, commissioner of GSA's public buildings service, sums up the program this way: "Good Neighbor relates to everything we do, every day. Through our downtown location and



In Tacoma, Washington, GSA worked with the city and state to restore a historic train station for adaptive use. Today, Union Station is a federal courthouse that has spurred the redevelopment of the downtown district. The Washington State History Museum opened its new facility next door, and a University of Washington branch campus is moving into historic structures across the street.

alternative use policies, our participation in special districts and other revitalization initiatives, and our Living Buildings and Public Buildings Heritage programs, we can create meaningful places in and around our buildings. This benefits not just federal workers, but all of us. It improves our neighborhoods. Our buildings are public buildings and we need to make them a part of the active civic life of our communities."

As a Good Neighbor, GSA plans to contribute to a community's overall planning strategy. It will participate in community meetings, invite civic leaders to share in its process, and exchange specific project information. It will work with city groups, and directly with cities and federal agencies, to provide services and competitive pricing to its customers. GSA hopes to build these partnerships to improve neighborhoods and make downtown locations more attractive. It is already working to keep federal agencies in central business areas and downtown historic districts, offering space and nontraditional uses.

The agency's planning and partnership efforts under Good Neighbor include its locational policies. It kept the Food and Drug Administration office in Buffalo in the central business district by meeting its unique need for laboratory spaces, and constructed a 500,000-square-foot IRS data center in downtown Detroit that employs several thousand people.

Since Good Neighbor began, GSA has started to contract directly with special districts, including business improvement districts (BIDs), to pay for necessary services such as street lighting and sidewalk cleaning around its buildings. It is currently working toward service agreements with more than 25 communities and has begun to purchase services from several BIDs. In Phoenix, for example—where GSA has a federal building and court-

house, a post office, and a parking lot within the downtown BID—the Downtown Phoenix Partnership provides marketing for the federal facilities, security escorts for employees and visitors, streetscape and landscape maintenance, graffiti removal, and cleaning. The partnership works directly with federal agencies to keep them downtown, hosting quarterly luncheons before leases expire. It also worked directly with a federal judge and the city to obtain donations of land for a new federal building.

Under the Public Buildings Cooperative Use Act of 1976, GSA can provide free or at-cost space for cultural, recreational, or educational use. It houses daycare centers in some facilities, provides space to colleges, works with the Small Business Administration to bring in services like dry cleaning, and provides space for art exhibits. As part of its Living Buildings Program, GSA can seek alternative and commercial uses for its facilities. And, through its Public Buildings Heritage Program, GSA maintains and restores its historic federal buildings throughout the country and holds exhibits to invite people to celebrate the nation's historic structures.

Peck says of all of GSA's Good Neighbor activities, "This is good business. It benefits our nation's building stock, our customers, and our communities. By being good neighbors, we are helping our cities to bring back the nation's downtowns, block by block, by attracting people, jobs, and dollars." —Hillary Levitt

HILLARY LEVITT is a special adviser for urban affairs with GSA's Public Buildings Service. For more information on GSA's Good Neighbor program, to participate in a community workshop, or to initiate a project in your community, call the GSA Public Buildings Service at 202-501-1100. Look for GSA's Good Neighbor Web site, accessible soon via www.gsa.gov.

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