



**Urban Land
Institute**

ULI in the Community Reality Check



Background

As global competition among regions becomes more pronounced, the economic success of any give region will depend on its ability to address key growth-related issues — economic diversity, environmental sustainability, integrated land use and transportation systems — at a regional scale.

Over the past 15 years, regional visioning has emerged as a dynamic and important tool for building regional consensus around growth and development. Several Urban Land Institute District Councils have taken the lead, in partnership with other key nonprofit and public sector organizations, to create and implement a consensus-based vision for regional growth and development.

Reality Check

Reality Check is a collaborative regional visioning process, developed by ULI, which engages diverse regional leaders in a dialogue on how their region should grow.

The exercise involves carefully selected multi-disciplinary stakeholders working in teams to allocate anticipated job and household growth using Legos® on large-scale regional maps. Each team begins by developing a set of principles to guide their decisions. Participants may also identify needed infrastructure improvements, conservation priorities or affordable housing opportunities, depending on the exercise design. The solutions developed can be compared against current trends, land use plans and policies and/or be aggregated into planning scenarios to be analyzed and discussed. The exercise develops a region-wide awareness of the level of growth that is anticipated, recognizes the legitimate points of view of different stakeholders, and creates a foundation for the development of a concrete list of next steps to assure quality growth.

District Council Examples

The first ULI Reality Check program was held by ULI Los Angeles in October 2002. In the five years that followed, this complex, resource-intensive, but powerful program has been undertaken in Washington D.C. and North Texas in 2005, across the state of Maryland in 2006 and in the Tampa Bay region in 2007. Reality Check momentum continues to accelerate, with ULI South Carolina set to launch a statewide Reality Check effort on December 3, 2007, in the Charleston region, to be followed by exercises in the Upstate and Midland areas of the state in 2008. Active planning efforts for Reality Check programs in 2008 are also underway in Arizona (three exercises throughout the “Sun Corridor”), Richmond, Seattle and the Triangle region of North Carolina.

Regions vary significantly as to their rate of growth, real estate market, environmental challenges, demography, geography, type of infrastructure, and jobs/housing balance. Reality Check is a flexible program model that can be adapted to accommodate these regional characteristics and each ULI District Council adapts Reality Check to reflect the culture and growth issues unique to its region.

www.uli.org/realitycheck

Reality Check Results

When the Lego exercise is over, Reality Check is far from finished; in fact, it is just beginning. Reality Check provides the momentum to begin the process of enacting change on a regional scale. One of the goals of Reality Check is that the diverse stakeholders who join ULI in planning the initial event become the nucleus of a new regional leadership team prepared to undertake a multi-year implementation effort. The implementation strategy can take several directions depending on the nature of the challenges and the available resources in each region. Examples of implementation initiatives include the following:

- **Policy Change** – In Los Angeles, ULI and its partners followed up their Reality Check exercise and developed the “2 percent strategy”, finding that it is not necessary to increase density everywhere. Rather, all of the projected growth for the region can be accommodated on 2% of the region’s land mass around key transportation nodes. Subsequently, the Southern California Association of Governments unanimously adopted new federal transportation funding allocation guidelines that give priority to projects in jurisdictions with land use policies that support increased density in the specified 2% areas.
- **Technical Assistance** – In Washington D.C., a number of local governments have sought ULI assistance in addressing issues raised in Reality Check such as the conversion of aging strip malls into mixed use centers, revitalization of suburban arterial corridors and education of public employees and elected officials on the development process and public/private partnership skills.
- **Outreach and Education** – In North Texas and Tampa Bay, the initial Reality Check effort has been followed by a broader outreach effort to identify and build support for a preferred growth strategy. This process has involved the creation of new entities, “Vision North Texas” and “One Bay,” to spearhead a series of sub-regional workshops, stakeholder symposiums, surveys and other vehicles for collecting input on alternative growth scenarios. Over 40 governments belonging to the North Central Texas Council of Governments have agreed to contribute funding for the implementation phase of the Vision North Texas effort.

The Reality Check process enables ULI District Councils to provide visible, effective leadership on the land use issues that are at the forefront of regional and local agendas. It leverages ULI’s notable strength as a respected multi-stakeholder convener to build consensus around solutions to these issues and creates an ongoing regional leadership platform to support the enactment of needed changes.

“Reality Check brought together many of Southern California’s warring constituencies and led to a broader and more inclusive vision for the growth of the Los Angeles region.”

Stuart R. Mork, Reality Check Chair, Los Angeles

“As a professional in the business, I knew [future growth]... was big, but until I saw it physically on a map, with those little plastic blocks, I really didn’t know how big it is.”

Jim Todd, President of the Peterson Companies, participant in Reality Check Washington