On a typically sunny fall day in Southern California, the seeds of a new way of thinking took root – one designed to upend conventional wisdom regarding affordable housing and community revitalization at a time when convention seems woefully out of date.

The all-day Symposium, “Building the Future of Community,” brought together stakeholders from various areas of expertise – housing, public safety, education, business, health and economic development – to discuss ways to collaboratively tackle problems government is increasingly ill-equipped to address.

“How many of you think Washington can fix this? How many of you think Sacramento can fix this?” asked Steve PonTell, chief executive officer of National Community Renaissance in opening the Symposium.

These were, of course, rhetorical questions. In California, the loss of redevelopment funding has neutralized government’s ability to even begin to fix the problems faced by struggling communities. Nationwide, it’s a similar story, creating a crisis that goes far beyond affordable housing.

Enter the Symposium’s organizer, National CORE, the nation’s third largest national developer of affordable housing. In its 20 years, the Rancho Cucamonga-based company has helped more than a quarter-million people, and today has developments in Florida, Arkansas, Texas and California.

Seeing National CORE as a catalyst and thought leader for broader community revitalization, PonTell developed the framework for the October 26 Symposium at the Sheraton Fairplex in Pomona, Calif. With sponsorship support from CIGNA, the event challenged participants to put community first, their own interests second. They responded.

Jennifer Gutzmore, Regional Medical Executive for CIGNA, said, “Collaboration is the key to solving a multitude of problems.” While participants offered a variety of individual perspectives on specific solutions, most agreed on this: The only way to make life better for those facing the greatest need is to grow the economy.

“I think that goes beyond what we think is our mutual, common self interest,” said Joel Kotkin, renowned author and community revitalization expert, “the only way to deal with the housing crisis and the mobility crisis is economic growth.”

That, and understanding that government’s ability to help has been greatly diminished – as it should be.

“Government doesn’t create wealth, but can create an environment where businesses create wealth,” said Devereaux.

Added Roger Selbert, one of the most highly regarded futurists in the United States: “If you want to improve the lives of those less fortunate, start with less regulation, more economic development.”
Phil Burgess (left) recommends civic leadership coalitions while Congressman Alan Mollohan emphasizes that government still has a role in making needed change.

CORE Director Sammi Reeves contends, “One person can lead the change.”

Businesses and communities are becoming less connected, according to National CORE President and CEO Steve PonTell.

Michael Hecht from Greater New Orleans Inc. shares community success stories from the rebuilding of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

“There is no better cure for social ills than a good-paying job.”

Michael Hecht (right) stresses the answers are not elsewhere but are found within your own community after Larry Fondation explains that decision makers are not seeing the big picture.
National Community Renaissance would like to thank all of our Symposium participants.

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"Homes are where jobs go to sleep at night."
CORE President Steve PonTell explains how a new trend in leadership called “time tithing” can bring needed expertise to help solve today’s problems of community building.

CORE Director Laura Kuhns reminds participants of the opportunity to learn from what has worked in other parts of the country.

From left: Steve Harding, Roger Selbert and Dan Nackerman debate different approaches. Harding emphasizes the need to reassure communities that you are not changing it by introducing affordable housing.

CORE Director Allan Kingston explains that the economy is the basis of the community and the economic structure has changed and participants need to diversify.

Cigna’s Dr. Jennifer Gutzmore emphasizes the need for transportable health care to reach people and that individuals must be self-motivated to maintain their health.

CORE Director Andy Wright (right) and Dan Fauske remind participants that housing developers are in the people business, not the real estate business.

CORE President Steve PonTell explains how a new trend in leadership called “time tithing” can bring needed expertise to help solve today’s problems of community building.

CORE Directors Andy Wright and Dan Fauske remind participants of the opportunity to learn from what has worked in other parts of the country.
Participants of the Symposium discussed many of the problems related to community renaissance, and in some cases, explored potential solutions.

Housing
Many factors contribute to the high and accelerating costs of housing, including government regulations (a.k.a. “red tape”), cost of land, labor requirements, and the lengthy and costly entitlement process. These cost factors help drive design decisions, and we end up with houses that are larger than what the market really needs. The lack of suitable housing stock leads to involuntary house sharing, overcrowding, and excessive burden on public infrastructure.

Education
An economy can be no better than the skills and abilities of the workforce. Therefore, local businesses can be an unexpected advocate for education, and their involvement could generate new revenue and training resources.

Economic Growth
Much has been said about government’s role in economic development, but perhaps the best roles for government are in regulatory reform, coordination of various relevant parties and initiatives, and the facilitation of the flow of information. Private sector is the one that really creates wealth, and government should be supportive of such efforts. Meanwhile, one should focus on what’s already there instead of competing with each other for outside investments. After all, 90% of job growth and 100% of job losses come from existing businesses. Economic growth also helps solve many social problems.

Environment & Infrastructure
The challenge today lies in the people’s desire for more government services without having to pay for them. We need to focus on our mutual, common self-interest and make sacrifices for our future. Once we consider all the impacts of our decisions, then we will find many investments to be socioeconomically desirable.

Health & Wellbeing
It’s not surprising to see that properly housed and employed people tend to be healthier. We should start incorporating health-related concerns into other endeavors such as housing design, education, transportation, and business decisions. Meanwhile, we need to explore incentives to induce healthier behavior, which will help reduce healthcare costs in the long run. The Healthy Community movement is a good starting point and should expand to include more relevant entities.

Where is the impetus to implement all these changes so our communities can flourish? Historically, changes are induced by crises, such as natural disasters, drastic economic restructuring, or military conflicts. We have many of those elements today. What we need now are agents of change – leaders with vision, managers that help organize and coordinate resources, and communities ready to embrace the vision and join forces to overcome the inertia. Despite our ideological and socioeconomic differences, there are many common goals that we all strive for - good-paying jobs, safer communities, better schools, better living environment, and healthier lives. It’s time to bridge the silos that have kept us from achieving greatness. It’s time to work together so we can experience Community Renaissance.

Conclusions