SMART COMMUNITIES
SECOND EDITION
How Citizens and Local Leaders Can Use Strategic Thinking to Build a Brighter Future
Suzanne W. Morse
Jossey-Bass
Praise for *Smart Communities*

“*Smart Communities* reminds us that nurturing community is the most difficult, most daunting, and most important work we do. Morse challenges us to get this right, and thankfully she leads the way.”
—Sherry Magill, president, Jessie Ball duPont Fund

“Any community members looking to move beyond that which has defined them for years, into a thriving community, owe it to themselves to read this book. Morse provides not only powerful tools for a community’s resurgence, but also insightful examples of how community leaders and citizens alike sought to remake their communities and succeeded. I was so taken by its timeless and compelling strategies that I bought 50 copies and handed them out around town.”
—Daniel J. Phelan, president, Jackson College, Michigan

“With *Smart Communities*, Suzanne Morse has achieved a unique blend of a national perspective and a community-centered study of what has helped, and will help, communities be successful over the long haul. There are many valuable lessons to be learned here, none more essential—whether for a big urban city or a small rural town—than preserving and maximizing assets. Communities that make best use of their assets will win, and Morse gives us all a road map for getting there.”
—Anne B. Pope, executive director, Tennessee Commission for the Arts, and former federal cochair, Appalachian Regional Commission

“A strong nation is dependent on strong communities—people coming together to address the problems of the community and its members. *Smart Communities* addresses how we can work together to help strengthen our nation.”
—Alma Powell, chair, America’s Promise Alliance

“Suzanne Morse’s *Smart Communities* is an inspirational, informative road map for all those who want to tackle public problems and strengthen their communities. There should be a copy in every public library. Read it, take hope from it, and use it!”
—Martha McCoy, executive director, Everyday Democracy, and president, The Paul J. Aicher Foundation
Register at www.josseybass.com/email for more information on our publications, authors, and to receive special offers.
The Instructor’s Guide to accompany the second edition of *Smart Communities* is available for free at www.wiley.com/college/morse
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Second Edition

Suzanne W. Morse

Jossey-Bass
A Wiley Brand
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td></td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td></td>
<td>xxi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Author</td>
<td></td>
<td>xxiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Building the Foundation for Community Change</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Investing Right the First Time</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Working Together</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Building on Community Strengths</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Practicing Democracy</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Preserving the Past</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Growing New Leaders</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Inventing the Future</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>References</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Index</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ten years ago the world had not talked on an iPhone; communicated via YouTube, Twitter, or Facebook; learned the ins and outs of organizational politics from characters on *The Office*, or seen the nation’s talent on *American Idol*. Three-dimensional printers now are making artificial limbs more compatible; dental crowns, implants, and dentures more affordable; and the prospects for new applications unlimited. No one would argue that enormous technological and social changes have not occurred during the past decade.

Unfortunately, far too much has not changed. Rates of poverty hover at the 15 percent mark, and too many Americans barely make ends meet, if at all. The world watched while Hurricane Katrina exposed our national inequities through the lens of New Orleans; Detroit and Kodak went bankrupt; and Youngstown shrank. The culprit for the downward spiral is not one thing or one program or even the Great Recession of 2007–2009, but a concentration of systemic issues. In this cloud of dust, however, places such as Houston grew, an auto trail in the South was forged, and regions such as the Fox Cities showed how it is done. Research over the last fifty years says that if policies, practices, programs, and the public will could align, the numbers would improve and self-sufficiency would increase. A clear definition of the problems and challenges, an openness to opportunities, and an implementation strategy for the long run are needed to make real change. The secret formula is merging how to work with precise community priorities.

With so much of our lives going online, day-to-day interactions have taken a hit. However, in our bigger, better, faster world of the twenty-first century, some fundamental requirements hold firm.
We need relationships in our lives, we need places for restoration and regeneration, and we need community. The editor-in-chief of *Popular Mechanics* magazine, James Meigs, said this: “Just because high-tech change is possible doesn’t mean we always want it,” citing the recent craft, natural fabrics, and slow food movements as evidence (July 24, 2013). Community work past, present, and future really is about keeping what works, losing what doesn’t, and inventing new approaches. Sociologist David Reisman said, “America is a land of second chances” (Potter, 1996, p. viii). The ideas presented in this book give every community in America a fresh start.

What communities need in order to embrace the changing global world with confidence is to take a holistic approach to success—not one thing but many—and to base their collective decisions on three critical factors: 1) the most objective and precise information available to fit their size, geographic location, and circumstances; 2) a collective vision of where they want to go; and 3) a collaborative strategy for achieving that vision. Success will not happen without all three. The challenges that communities face in achieving these three objectives can be summed up by Yogi Berra’s (1998) comment to his wife on a long and circuitous trip to the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York: “We are completely lost, but we are making good time.” Yogi’s optimism notwithstanding, he spoke volumes about the way that too many community members and elected officials approach the future: just keep driving in the same direction and maybe we will get there. That strategy has never worked and never will!

**The Ideas That Inform This Book**

Communities across the world face an array of challenges, not the least of which is the moving target of the world economy. While a range of ecological and social problems need to be solved, perhaps the most pressing dilemma for places of all sizes is how to make gains in the changing economy while preserving a strong quality of life. Some would say we want it all—and we do. We want to make a living wage and have choices about where we live and how.

The first edition of *Smart Communities* was supported by powerful examples of places that were defying the odds on a range of issues based on their ability to work in different ways. It was clear from that early research that the communities which were doing
the best had less division about direction, more engagement from community members, and an enlarged vision of what could be. In place after place, we saw sparkplugs that generated a new future. In Tupelo, Mississippi, newspaper publisher George McLean ignited the future more than eighty years ago. In western North Carolina, a small group believed that the region’s rich tradition of arts and crafts could be the change that was needed. Or in Fargo, North Dakota, and Moorhead, Minnesota, demographic changes fueled new and unexpected opportunities to work together. The list goes on. We were certain ten years ago, and we are certain now, that sustainable change requires new ways of working. But there is another step in the process: action. That action begins by using community resources, stakeholders, and assets to craft a new vision and then defining and implementing a strategy to reach that vision. Recently, I was in a very small community trying to find the most direct route to a town in the same region. When I stopped a passerby to ask directions, he replied, “There are many ways to get there from here.” When I said just give me one, he said, “Where are you starting from?” Well, we are starting from here with the belief that implementing the seven strategies of *Smart Communities* will get you to your destination in a timely way:

- Invest right the first time
- Work together
- Build on community strengths
- Practice democracy
- Preserve the past
- Grow new leaders
- Invent a brighter future

An additional ten years of civic practice and research has affirmed that process + action is the gold standard formula for success.

**Finding a Guide for Success: Process + Action**

The Pew Partnership for Civic Change and its successor organization, Civic Change, Inc., worked with over one hundred
communities in a twenty-year span on a range of issues. We began this work in 1992 focused on smaller cities; over the years that research expanded to include some of the largest. As report after report was crafted, the same observations seemed to hold no matter the place or the evaluator. One of the first reports on the findings of the fourteen original Pew Partnership communities, *Just Call It Effective*, identified eight characteristics of change strategies that were working in those cities: 1) had more players at the table; 2) involved new people who built new relationships; 3) built collaboration and partnerships; 4) worked and thought long-term; 5) addressed significant issues and values; 6) took responsibility for the change that they wanted; 7) invented the strategies that worked for that place at that time; and 8) balanced their approach and emphasis (Dewar, Dodson, Paget, and Roberts, 1998). Fifteen years later, another report, *What Makes a Solution*, had complementary findings: 1) long-term commitment to the most pressing programs is critical; 2) collaboration is key; 3) an ounce of prevention goes a long way; 4) research counts to raise public awareness, build support, and expand coalitions; 5) focus is usually on a unit of measurement—families, neighborhoods, and whole communities (Freedman, 2003). These findings and conversations with literally thousands of community members, local policymakers, and researchers helped shaped the seven leverage points that comprise the *Smart Communities* process. Although the issues were different across the communities evaluated in these two reports, the ways of working were not.

The *Smart Communities* framework provides an everyday strategy for community members, policymakers, and civic leaders to actually change the future. Applying the seven leverage points produces better decisions, builds a stronger sense of community and inclusion for all who live there, and is the strongest line of defense against globalization, budget cuts, and a changing economy.

As community after community has used the framework to reorder and remake its civic work culture, the inevitable question arises: now what? Once the seven points are fully embraced, the next step is to apply the new way of working to an issue-based agenda. Based on that question, we developed a data-driven model, The Thriving Communities Model®, to test out two
important questions: Where should communities invest? Do quality-of-life investments impact a thriving economy? Using multiple regression techniques, we analyzed economic and quality-of-life variables in 358 metropolitan statistical areas to determine the answers. The analysis showed that a vibrant economy creates a high quality of life and that a high quality of life creates a thriving economy. Neither element was more important than the other, and both must be present for communities to be successful. A strong economy leads to a robust quality of life as much as a robust quality of life leads to a strong economy. This finding cements what community development professionals and community members have argued for years—place still matters.

The Thriving Communities Model defined a successful community as one where employment, per-capita income, median household income, and poverty all beat the national averages. A robust quality of life was defined as a first-rate educational system, lower taxes, affordable housing, access to health care, a strong emphasis on the arts and plentiful recreation, transportation connections, a low crime rate, and high social capital. Using the correlation of these factors between and among each other, a pattern emerged of the strongest cities in each category. The collective analysis of all 358 communities and the lessons learned from them are the foundation of the best practices and insights discussed in this book. Building a strong economy and high quality of life lead to a competitive advantage that can impact all areas of a community. This requires that communities be nimble, adaptable to new circumstances, and innovative in their approaches. This research shows communities how to merge process with practice with better results. However, the process is not complex or the practices mysterious. They are commonsense.

As Denise Shekerjian (1990) reminds us in her book on creative genius, much of what is needed in life is hard work, determination, and resolve:

It’s far preferable to believe in thunderbolts than it is to have to face up to the mundane, trivial workaday world. It might come as a disappointment, then, to realize that behind any creative piece of work is a lot of earthbound effort, part of which is concerned with the conscious arrangements of conditions suitable for encouraging one’s creative impulses. (pp. 44–45)
Who Should Read This Book and Why

*Smart Communities* differs from other community-building books in key ways. First, it embeds process into results. Not only does it highlight successes, but it also discusses the process needed to attain them.

Second, the book has a foundation that includes theory, practice-based research, and quantitative and qualitative data. This multifaceted approach leads to a better understanding of how community problem solving can lead to success. The research that grounds *Smart Communities* is not guesswork. The discussion of each of the seven leverage points includes both foundational research and illustrations of successful community applications.

Third, the book moves out of midsize-to-large cities and examines practices and results in smaller cities, towns, and rural areas. Jane Jacobs (1961) cautioned that we cannot extrapolate what we learn from small cities and towns to what she calls the Great Cities, but I think we can. Small-to-midsize cities and towns can be laboratories for the change that is needed. Scale allows a more precise investigation. In other words, this book identifies the kinds of practices that will work anywhere.

*Smart Communities* is for all those people who have a say—or want a say—in the decisions affecting their community. The ideas will have more impact when they are taken as a whole. While each principle stands alone, all are necessary to achieve success. Further, the strategies will be most effective if they are understood and practiced by more than just a few people. They can prompt a communitywide conversation about what is working and what needs to be changed. To be smart, communities must act smart. That requires new thinking and more action—together. The lessons of the book can be instructive to several key audiences: newly elected or appointed officials, business and nonprofit leaders, community-based researchers, community members and civic leaders, college and university faculty and students, and local and national funders.

Elected or appointed officials are under increased pressure to produce results while not raising taxes. While they may know intellectually what needs to be done, they lack the examples or best cases to sell their approach to the public, particularly if public
funds are involved. Corporate leaders, development directors, and chambers of commerce know well that quality of life is the tipping point for business location, relocation, and expansion. Yet too often the emphasis is only on economic incentives and one-industry solutions.

For community researchers, the book provides new places to look for best practices and new variables to consider as community success is evaluated. It points the spotlight on a way of working that creates both the foundation for and the likelihood of successful outcomes.

In academia, schools and departments of urban and regional planning, sociology, public administration, and policy have tended to focus attention and study in community development courses on federal and state policy rather than on community practice and validated research. It is critical that students understand what is required of them “on the ground” to make progress on issues as they begin their careers or continue their studies. Students from a variety of disciplines will see in real time the importance of inclusive planning and engagement, timely investments, asset-based development, and the role that elected officials and public administrators can and should play. This book will give students a new lens and new tools for analyzing community success and process for their research, course work, and service learning.

For service learning and engagement professionals, this book provides students with the skills and the processes that they will need in their community placements and research. This book takes the reader behind the scenes to a better understanding of how communities actually can work.

For community members and civic leaders, this book is intended to provide direction but also to be a blueprint for what must be done and could be done. If there is a place or section in the book where you say, “My community could never do that,” then get started to create the will and opportunity for it to happen.

Local and national funders will find both a template and a map in this research for their own work. The leverage points offer a way of working that can be fostered by investing in the capacity of community members and local and regional organizations to learn and apply these principles. In some ways, it is validation for the work already being done or on the drawing board. The case
examples show the possible. For every community that thinks it “can’t,” someplace else assumes it can. The questions for funders are how to be more efficient with funding and how to be more effective with all available resources.

Finally, this book presents a new approach to determining community advantage in the globalized world by focusing on the interrelationship of economic prosperity, quality of life, and place using tested practices of change. The individuals, organizations, and communities profiled in this book addressed the problem, whatever it was, and took action. They did not gloss over it, wring their hands, or play the blame game. They took responsibility and made smart decisions. They listened. They worked together. They kept at it until the job was done. They found new routes to address old problems.

Identifying the Cases

We used a variety of scans in the community selection. We examined lists of all kinds and also national databases such as The Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT® (2013), the Thriving Communities data set, and the U.S. Census. But most important, we visited many of the cities for ourselves. We were not looking for perfect communities, but rather those that were applying the leverage points in real-time. Like ten years ago, some cities are considered “hot.” These are the go-to places of what works, such as Austin, both Portlands, and Chattanooga. You will see these cities profiled here, but you also will see “outliers.” These are new places that you may not have thought about much, which are doing really interesting things in innovative ways.

But all of the communities profiled will tell you that none of this is easy at first or even down the way. As one community leader told me, “We are really making progress, but some days it is really frustrating.” Indeed, that is what community work can be: frustrating, rewarding, and hard work. As communities go about implementing the seven leverage points, the process can be messy, all over the board, and incredibly frustrating. But when that happens, add some new people to the work, get out the map, and keep all eyes focused on the vision. This book gives some instructions on how to do all three.
Overview of Contents

Chapter One, “Building the Foundation for Community Change,” provides a brief discussion of how cities have evolved and why. This includes the impact of key public policies, the advent of the global economy, and the changes in demographics and location preferences.

Chapter Two, “Investing Right the First Time,” develops the idea that communities need investment strategies which allow them to prevent problems rather than just react to them. Communities have a wide array of capital to bring to issues and opportunities. Many of these issues are referred to as “wicked” problems. The challenge is to identify strategic ways to use capital for the strongest results in addressing these problems. This chapter also introduces the concept of Triple Bottom Line budgeting, investing, and decision making for communities. Cases profiled are Minneapolis, Minnesota; Ann Arbor, Michigan; Portland, Oregon; and Seattle, Washington—all communities with strong investment results.

Chapter Three, “Working Together,” examines the advantages and the practicality of community members and adjacent communities working together. In a world of fences, barriers, and divisions, the smartest communities are finding ways to work together across fault lines and county lines. The chapter discusses vehicles that communities can use to organize themselves for more collaborative approaches and overcome the barriers that prevent them. Through the case examples of Chattanooga, Tennessee; Almena, Wisconsin; and Austin, Texas, the principles, practices, and value of new ways of working are illustrated.

Chapter Four, “Building on Community Strengths,” illustrates how ways of new thinking can lead to better results. Twenty years ago two Northwestern University researchers put forth an idea that communities have undiscovered assets that could be brought to bear on old problems and new opportunities. Emphasizing assets over deficits can change minds and outcomes for those inside communities and can change the lens for those outside. The asset-based approach to development unleashes possibilities for change. Four communities illustrate how looking within with new eyes and perspectives can make all the difference: the
Broadmoor Neighborhood in New Orleans; Chimney Rock, North Carolina; and two Texas cities, Saluda and Hidalgo.

Chapter Five, “Practicing Democracy,” examines new ways of engaging and participating in politics as well as some time-tested engagement methods. As the world has become more linked electronically, the inevitable question is whether we are more engaged or not. This chapter looks at whether technology can be a key factor in stronger democratic practice and, if so, how that can happen. Dialogue, public deliberation, and engagement are not luxuries in a democracy; they are necessary components for sustained action.

All three of the engagement formats profiled—Oregon Citizens’ Initiative Review, Jacksonville Community Council, Inc., and Hampton, Virginia, city government—are instructive on ways that new media, old media, and participatory democracy can work together.

Chapter Six, “Preserving the Past,” examines how communities are using buildings, culture, and history to create different scenarios for the future that contribute greatly to the economic and quality-of-life indices. Cultural stories and historic places bind communities together and allow new perspectives and ideas to emerge. More and more places are turning inward as they look for levers to position their community in the global economy. In different ways, each of the community initiatives profiled has led to goals that improve the overall well-being of the community and its members by building on the past. The designation of historic places, the restoration of important buildings, and the rejuvenation of the downtown all have given Lowell, Massachusetts; Birmingham, Alabama; Charlottesville, Virginia; Denver, Colorado; and Asheville, North Carolina, new life, new possibilities, and new revenue.

Chapter Seven, “Growing New Leaders,” looks at the broad-based, strategic leadership that is needed to create a thriving economy and a strong quality of life. Communities are filled with people—community champions—who do and could make significant contributions to conversations and strategies needed to implement change. Too often, the same people direct the conversation and the agenda. The new metaphor for community leadership is bench strength—getting people prepared, activated, and
encouraged to get involved. This chapter presents profiles on three community champions—from Charleston, South Carolina; Harlem in New York City; and Tupelo, Mississippi—whose example shows how one person can make a difference. There are also examples of two organizations, the Kansas Health Foundation and the Northwest Area Foundation, with different missions and purposes, which have identified leadership bench strength as a key strategy for addressing “wicked” problems.

Chapter Eight, “Inventing the Future,” looks at what it takes to create a new future. Just as innovators and inventors need to find new ways to make things easier, faster, and more accessible and sustainable, so do communities. Communities faced with new realities have learned that old ways of working and investing are not producing the needed results; they are inventing new futures. The examples of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Greenville-Spartanburg, South Carolina; and Cumberland, Maryland, show how communities have built on their past, invested in their future, and used the principles that make smarter communities.

Sir Winston Churchill once said, “Doing your best is sometimes not enough; you have to do what is required.” The future of our communities rests on our ability to take action together to create futures that build a strong economy and a high quality of life for all and with all.

As the following chapters illustrate, success is neither place nor size bound. It comes from a set of seven tested leverage points that help all communities decide their futures. Based on ten years of additional observation and research, these seven principles are still the “north star” for community work.

Charlottesville, Virginia
February 2014

Suzanne Morse
Having the chance to revisit the ideas and places of *Smart Communities* a decade later is a privilege and an honor. Tremendous work is happening in every corner of the country. I have seen it for myself. Since the first writing, I have visited many communities and regions that are determined to get things done right. The times demand new thinking and action, and plenty of places are doing just that. While this edition contains new ideas and new illustrations, the fundamental belief that communities can be stronger and better if they work differently remains steadfast. As I revisited the communities profiled ten years ago, I was inspired when I heard about their successes. Perhaps the biggest difference between this version of the book and the original is the mounting evidence that these principles are working to make communities thrive.

I want to thank the many people who took the time to talk with me about their communities and introduced me to the people and processes that are behind their success. Community members spoke with pride and hope, but also realism, about the work completed and still to be done. I have learned from them to stay the course but change when needed, look around for good ideas and examples to borrow from and adapt, and plan for change.

My appreciation goes to the reviewers, whose advice and suggestions were critical in reshaping this edition, and especially to Alison Hankey, senior editor at Jossey-Bass/Wiley, who convinced me that the ten-year edition not only was needed but also was a really good idea. Her encouragement has been the foundation of the writing process.

Thanks also go to all the people who supported the effort this time and also the first time around, including the Pew Partnership
for Civic Change networks and my colleagues at The Pew Charitable Trusts. For this second edition, faculty and students at the University of Virginia, School of Architecture, have been great supporters and advisers on this work. Dean Kim Tanzer’s financial support allowed for a summer of uninterrupted writing and the assistance of a research team. That team included Harriett Jameson, my principal researcher for two years, as well as a great group who joined her at different points in the process: Alexander Kaplan, Lucas Lyons, Kate Murtagh, Julia Triman, and Thomas Wheet. Thank you all for your first-rate research assistance and for your great ideas and insights into the cases and their implications. Also, a word of thanks goes to the Jossey-Bass editorial teams for their skill and care in seeing the book through the process.

Finally, my son, Will, who is one of those future leaders whom any community would be glad to welcome, was a great source of inspiration. My sincerest appreciation goes to him and to our family and friends, who have been patient, supportive, encouraging, and indulgent regarding my late arrivals and early departures. And last but not least, this edition is dedicated to Ned, whose wisdom about these matters was unparalleled and whose support was unfailing.

—S.W.M.