

NEW CITIES

Build the Next American Places

Rail-connected, nature-cooled, climate-ready communities: rebuild the cities we have, grow new districts beside them, and prove out a handful of genuinely new cities where the evidence supports them.

PILLAR 4 · BUILD ENOUGH, BUILD WELL**AT A GLANCE****The problem**

Climate displacement is coming, housing is impossible to add where demand is, and America has forgotten how to build new places.

The proposal

Three tracks: legacy-city renewal first, rail-hub districts second, and two or three genuinely new-city pilots, all nature-cooled, walkable, and evaluation-gated.

Cost & funding

Not yet scored, and the brief says so; per-pilot federal exposure capped in statute, financed through public land stewardship and value capture, with the pro forma rules published before dollars.

Evidence strength

Strong for components (compact form, urban nature, rail-oriented development); the combined new-city bet is explicitly a hypothesis tested by pilots.

Principal risk

Ghost-city failure: building where demand never comes. The design answer is demand anchors, phases, and stop rules.

Success looks like

Occupancy, cost per home, resident outcomes, and public financial return at every phase gate, independently measured.

Summary

America should build new places again: rail-connected, nature-cooled, walkable communities in the country's more climate-resilient regions, ready to receive the people that heat, fire, and flood will move. The honest structure is three tracks, not a wave of cities in empty fields. First and largest, rebuild the legacy cities that already have streets, water, universities, and room, places like Cleveland, Buffalo, St. Louis, and Toledo, whose infrastructure once served far more people than live there now. Second, build complete new districts, planned like new cities but attached to existing ones, on rail yards, closed bases, brownfields, and edge land, where a unified plan can deliver in years what parcel-by-parcel fighting delivers in decades. Third, and deliberately limited, build two or three genuinely new-city pilots where a viable rail corridor, long-term water, committed employers, and honest demand analysis all line up, sized in phases of ten to twenty-five thousand residents, with independent evaluations that decide whether each phase earns the next.

Every funded place meets the same standard: daily needs within a walk or a short transit trip, transit running from first occupancy, at least 30 percent permanently affordable homes, nature built in as working infrastructure the way Medellin's Green Corridors cooled that city by about 2 degrees Celsius, and construction that doubles as a national proving ground for mass timber, additive manufacturing, regional materials, and the building knowledge this continent's first peoples developed over millennia, engaged as partners, never mined. This is the platform's biggest build, and its most explicitly hypothesis-shaped: we know the components work; whether they combine into thriving new American places is exactly what the pilots exist to find out.

The Principle

A country that cannot build new places is a country that has decided its map is finished. Ours is not. Climate change is already redrawing it, and the only question is whether the redrawing is planned or panicked: whether families leave flood-prone and fire-prone regions on their own terms, toward places prepared to receive them, or as refugees after the disaster, toward places that never made room. The principle is to build the receiving capacity before the emergency, in the regions with water and comparative safety, connected by rail to the country's economic life, and designed from the first street for the century they will actually face. And the ambition is deliberate: this is the platform's answer to the idea that America cannot do big things anymore, a race not to a moon but to a way of living, where technology serves the people inside it, growth means better rather than merely more, and the proof is a place you can walk through.

The System Failure

Three failures converge here. First, the housing crisis is worst exactly where adding housing is hardest: the regulatory gauntlet this pillar's lead brief documents makes building in high-demand metros a decade-long, parcel-by-parcel war, while the vetocracy brief shows why. Second, climate displacement is arriving without receiving capacity. Researchers already identify the Great Lakes region as a likely climate destination and warn that receiving communities must prepare housing and services before migration accelerates, not after. Nothing in current policy does that preparation. Third, the country has simply stopped making new places. The nation that built railroad towns, land-grant communities, the New Deal greenbelt towns, and the TVA's purpose-built cities now treats the founding of a place as something other countries do.

Other countries do. China built more than 3,800 new towns over four decades that now house over 150 million people, proof that governments can build at civilizational scale, and proof of what goes wrong when they build against demand: the same record produced the ghost cities, the speculative debt, the empty towers. Saudi Arabia's Line is the cautionary tale at the other extreme, a technological monument designed around a rendering rather than around people. The lesson this brief takes is neither "never build" nor "build anything": it is that new places succeed when demand anchors come first, phases stay small enough to stop, and the design serves residents rather than spectacle. Meanwhile the American population math counsels focus, not fantasy: the Census Bureau projects the national population peaking around 370 million near 2080 before declining.¹ This program is not justified by national growth. It is justified by redistribution, the millions who will move as climate pressure builds and housing costs push, and by the shortage of good places for them to land.

The Proposal

1. **Three tracks, priority in this order.** Legacy-city renewal first and largest: federal partnership to rebuild underused neighborhoods in cities that already own streets, water systems, universities, and hospitals, where rehabilitation is honestly compared against new construction and usually wins. Rail-hub districts second: complete new districts, master-planned like new cities but attached to existing municipalities, on assembled public land (rail yards, closed installations, brownfields, contiguous edge sites), with one plan, one permitting authority, by-right approval against pre-set standards, and firm deadlines, the Voice-Not-Veto Test applied in full. New-city pilots third and smallest: two or three genuinely new communities, only where a demand test is met before ground breaks: a viable rail corridor justified by existing intercity travel, secured long-term water, at least one committed anchor employer or institution, and independent population and employment analysis. No project anywhere is sold as a climate haven; the standard is lower comparative risk with an adaptation plan, because no American place is climate-proof.
2. **Rail first, corridors chosen by demand.** The network is layered, not uniform: true high-speed rail where density justifies it (the Midwest corridors radiating from Chicago, and their peers elsewhere), fast electrified intercity rail between regional cities, and local transit feeding every station. New districts and pilot cities locate on corridors that are viable without them, so a station strengthens the line rather than excusing it, and every community is a hub on the national network from its first day, at the construction costs the world pays, not the American premium, per this pillar's transit-cost doctrine.

3. **Public stewardship, not giveaway partnership.** A public development authority acquires land before routes and sites are announced, so the public captures the value its own investment creates instead of paying speculators for it. The public keeps the land; private and nonprofit builders compete for long-term ground leases with affordability, labor, and performance terms attached; land-value gains finance the rail, parks, schools, and utilities; and contracts carry open books, audit rights, and clawbacks. Private firms build much of these places. They do not own the government, the essential utilities, or the public squares. At least 30 percent of homes in every funded place are permanently affordable, locked before the first station is announced, because rail investment without affordability protection is a displacement machine, and the record says so.
4. **Nature as working infrastructure.** Medellin turned the edges of 18 roads and 12 waterways into connected green corridors and cooled the city by about 2 degrees Celsius on average, up to 4 in the corridors themselves, while cleaning air and returning biodiversity.² That is the design language here: continuous tree canopy over the walking and cycling network, restored streams and wetlands doing flood-control duty, parks engineered to store stormwater, cool roofs and shaded streets, native habitat running through the city rather than fenced outside it, and hard limits on floodplain building. Cities designed for people walking, with cars accommodated but never sovereign: most daily needs within a short walk or ride, no mandatory parking minimums, streets safe for an eight-year-old on a bicycle.

5. **Voluntary relocation, never abandonment.** Families in repeatedly damaged places get a real choice: relocation assistance covering replacement-cost housing, not depressed pre-disaster value; open to renters as well as owners; available to whole communities that choose to move together, with jobs, schools, healthcare continuity, and moving costs handled; and paired with continued adaptation investment for those who stay. Managed retreat and forced displacement are opposites, and the program is built to keep them so: no service withdrawal to push people out, no pressure dressed as help, and the choice to remain is respected and supported.
6. **A national proving ground, technology-neutral.** These places are where American industry refines what the world will need: additive construction, modular and panelized building, mass timber, low-carbon concrete, microgrids and storage, water reuse, and controlled-environment agriculture, competing against conventional methods on measured lifecycle cost, durability, emissions, and resident experience, never adopted as spectacle. The solar lesson applies exactly as far as it applies: sustained public demand drove solar's cost down more than 80 percent, and stable procurement from these communities can do the same for manufacturable systems, while site-built construction may never follow that curve, which is why everything competes and the measurements decide. Food follows the same honesty: controlled-environment agriculture more than doubled its operations from 2009 to 2019 and belongs in these cities where its economics work, but its energy costs and crop limits make it a fresh-produce layer, not food independence; the goal is regional food resilience, greenhouses on waste heat, gardens, regional farm contracts, and reserves.

7. Building with the land, and with its first stewards. The deepest building knowledge on this continent predates the grid: orientation to sun and wind, earthen mass, courtyards and shade, settlement patterned on watersheds, land managed with fire and care across generations. The program tests hybrid systems, engineered timber with straw and hemp-lime insulation, compressed earth with modern reinforcement, passive design validated by modern instruments, in occupied pilot buildings, region by region, because a Great Lakes palette is not a Plains palette. And it treats Indigenous knowledge as the property of nations, not a database to mine: government-to-government consultation from site selection onward, authority to decline or restrict, paid leadership roles, data sovereignty over culturally sensitive knowledge, contracting priority for tribal enterprises, revenue sharing where knowledge becomes product, and support for tribally led demonstration communities where nations want them.

The Pilot Pro Forma: Rules Before Dollars

A serious pilot publishes its financial and governance skeleton before it asks for a dollar, and it publishes rules rather than pretending to cost precision it cannot have yet. This is that skeleton, and every line is a commitment the enabling statute would carry.

The budget ceiling. Each pilot's total federal exposure is capped in the authorizing statute, hard, before ground breaks. The cap is set by reference-class forecasting, published alongside the bill: the documented actual costs of comparable district-scale projects, foreign and domestic, including their overruns, not their brochures. If projected costs reach 125 percent of the authorized ceiling, work pauses and nothing continues without re-authorization in public. No supplemental-by-default, no too-far-along-to-stop. The ceiling is the point.

The sequencing that prevents stranded assets. The critique that a stop rule after rail and schools are built leaves stranded public assets is correct, so the sequence is built to make it impossible: demand validation gates come before heavy infrastructure, not after. Land assembly and utilities-scale planning first; a validation phase in which actual pre-commitments, employers signed, housing reservations deposited, institutions committed, must clear published thresholds; only then rail extensions, schools, and major public works. If validation fails, what exists is land and plans, which unwind cleanly, not empty stations.

Land, bought in daylight. Public land assembly is where insider dealing lives, so the rules are bright lines. Acquisition at published independent fair-market appraisal. No eminent domain for new-place pilots, none; a project that cannot assemble land from willing sellers at fair prices has failed its first market test. Every parcel acquisition disclosed on a public register within 90 days of the assembly phase closing (a short confidentiality window exists only to prevent speculative front-running, and it ends on a statutory date, not at an official's discretion). Officials and contractors with project knowledge are barred from land dealing in the corridor under clawback and criminal penalty. Where any pilot touches tribal land or treaty interests, the partnership rules in this brief govern: consent, not consultation theater.

The debt structure. Land purchases run through a public land bank financed by long-dated bonds secured by the land itself. District infrastructure is financed by value-capture instruments only after the validation gate, sized to captured value actually contracted, not projected. The federal role is defined exposure, capital grants inside the ceiling and loan guarantees with first-loss limits, never an open-ended backstop; there is no general-fund backfill of district debt, and the statute says so, because the moment investors believe Washington will eat any loss, discipline is fiction.

The affordability bands, defined. “30 percent permanently affordable” is not allowed to stay vague: of that share, at least one-third serves households at or below 50 percent of area median income, at least one-third between 50 and 80 percent, and the remainder up to 120 percent, mixed between rental and limited-equity ownership. Permanence is structural, delivered through public ground leases and community land trusts that survive any later sale, not through covenants that expire in thirty years. The subsidy mechanism is named: the land came in at pre-announcement value, and the write-down between that basis and market-rate ground rent is the permanent, non-appropriated subsidy that funds the bands.

Local consent. No pilot lands on a region that did not ask for it. Site selection requires affirmative approval by the host county’s elected governing body or a referendum, and the surrounding region’s metropolitan planning organization signs the infrastructure plan. The new place pays negotiated transition payments to host-county services until incorporation, so existing residents are not taxed to subsidize their new neighbor.

Governance, staged. A state-chartered development authority with a statutory sunset runs the build. At a defined population threshold, residents vote on municipal incorporation, and the authority’s powers transfer to the elected government on a published schedule; policing and schools are contracted from the host county until incorporation, then transition by agreement; water, sewer, broadband, and district energy are built publicly and stay publicly owned. An authority that outlives its sunset without an incorporation vote is a failure mode, and the statute treats it as one: sunset means sunset.

The unwind plan, written before groundbreaking. Every gate carries a named failure disposition, published in advance. If validation fails: the land bank disposes of assembled land at market over a decade, with proceeds retiring the bonds, right-of-first-refusal to adjacent communities and to the legacy-renewal track, and any affordability covenants already attached persisting through sale. If a later gate fails: completed infrastructure conveys to the county or utility district at written-down value rather than rotting in escrow, and the authority dissolves on its sunset. Publishing the funeral arrangements is not pessimism. It is the discipline that separates a pilot from a boondoggle, and it is what the evaluation-gated language in this brief means in practice.

Implementation Pathway

A National Resilient Communities and Corridors Act establishes the development authority, the three tracks, and the competitive process: regional partnerships propose projects, every proposal is scored on the same published criteria (water, climate exposure, rail viability, demand evidence, infrastructure reuse, ecological cost, local democratic support, lifecycle cost per resident), and the best projects win regardless of track. Phases are the discipline: plan and acquire land quietly, build a first district of ten to twenty-five thousand residents with schools, clinics, groceries, and transit open on day one, measure everything through independent evaluation, and let the results decide expansion. A reasonable opening portfolio is eight to twelve legacy-renewal and district projects and two or three new-city pilots. The federal role is infrastructure, credit, land stewardship, and standards; each community gets an elected government and the freedom to diverge from the original plan, because a city is not a product and residents are not users.

Funding and Public-Value Logic

The Ledger lists this honestly as not yet scored, and this brief does not invent the number; the pilot legislation gets scored like everything else. What the design guarantees is the direction of the flows: public land acquisition ahead of announcement means the appreciation that rail and infrastructure create returns to the public that created it, ground-lease revenue and value capture service the infrastructure debt, and the affordability share is financed by the land economics rather than bolted on. Federal rail and infrastructure dollars, low-cost credit, and state contributions do the heavy lifting early; the return arrives as tax base, as industrial capability, as avoided disaster losses, and, if the pilots succeed, as the template. When public investment creates land value, the public keeps a substantial share. That rule is the finance model.

Risks and Guardrails

The honest risk list is long, and the design answers each named risk. Ghost cities: demand anchors before construction, small phases, occupancy and employment benchmarks with real stop rules, and no financing structure that depends on perpetually rising land prices. Draining the cities we should be saving: the track priority runs the other way, legacy renewal is first and largest, and new projects near struggling cities must show they complement rather than cannibalize. Greenfield harm: compact footprints, already-disturbed land preferred, more surrounding land conserved than developed, and full accounting of embodied carbon and induced sprawl; some economically attractive sites should lose on ecological grounds, and the scoring lets them. Corporate capture: the stewardship model exists precisely for this, public land, open books, clawbacks, competitive rebidding. Coercive relocation: the voluntary rules above, in statute. Technocratic sterility: elected local government, phased organic growth, and no requirement that anyone live as a demonstration. This platform's own vetocracy critique cuts both ways here, and the same test that binds permitting reform binds this program.

Metrics for Success

Every phase gate measures, independently: construction cost per home against regional conventional baselines; occupancy and the pace of household formation; housing affordability including the 30 percent floor; resident energy, water, and transportation costs; transit ridership and mode share; employment access and business formation; heat and flood performance against design targets; health and social-connection indicators; displacement effects in surrounding communities; and public financial return on the land model. Publication is automatic, the dashboards are public, and the evaluations bind: a phase that misses its gates is redesigned, re-managed, or stopped, and the money moves to the tracks that are working.

Opposition and Responses

Some will call this utopian central planning. The design is nearly the opposite: government builds enabling infrastructure and sets public-interest rules, then lets communities grow, diverge, and govern themselves, with funding gated on results rather than faith. The utopian move would be promising dozens of cities; this proposes two or three pilots and a lot of measurement. Some will say fix existing cities instead, and this brief agrees: legacy renewal is the first and largest track, and the honest comparison between rehabilitation and new construction is built into the scoring. Some will say rail stops cannot conjure economies, and that is why corridors must be viable without the new stops and pilots must show committed employers before ground breaks. Some will say it is corporate welfare in green paint; the answer is the stewardship model, which is precisely the set of terms a giveaway would omit. And some will say people will not move. Some will not, and nothing here compels them; the program bets that affordable homes, real jobs, short commutes, and safety from the next flood are reasons people have always moved, and the pilots will test the bet in public.

What Would Change Our Position

This is the platform's most explicitly hypothesis-shaped proposal, so the falsifiers are the design. If the pilot districts miss occupancy and employment benchmarks, expansion stops, and that is a promise, not a prediction. If independent lifecycle comparison shows legacy-city rehabilitation consistently outperforming new construction on cost per resident and outcomes, the money follows the evidence into the cities we already have, and the new-city track shrinks to whatever niche the data supports. If relocation assistance shows coercive drift in practice, the program pauses before it scales. If the hybrid building systems lose to conventional construction on measured lifecycle cost and durability, they remain research rather than policy. And if land-value capture fails to finance the infrastructure as modeled, the fiscal design gets rebuilt before another site is announced. The ambition is the race; the evaluations are the brakes; both are the point.

Public-Facing Language

Here is the short version. America used to build new places: railroad towns, land-grant colleges with towns around them, whole communities with purpose built in. Then we stopped, and now the places people need to live are unaffordable, the places climate change will empty have no plan, and the places that could receive millions sit underused in the middle of the country. So build again, in order: rebuild the great lake and heartland cities that already have the bones; raise new rail-hub districts beside the towns we have; and prove out a few genuinely new cities, cooled by trees and streams instead of just air conditioning, connected by fast trains, walkable end to end, with a third of the homes affordable forever, testing the best building ideas this country and its first peoples ever had. Not a monument. Not a rendering. A network of places where an ordinary family can afford a good life, and the proof that America still knows how to build one.

SOURCES

1. U.S. Census Bureau, 2023 national population projections [↔](#)
2. UN Environment Programme on Medellín's Green Corridors [↔](#)

The American Mainspring Project · This printout reflects the live site at the time of printing, and updates whenever the site is updated.