

# National program rates neighborhoods' eco-friendliness

By Wendy Koch  
USA TODAY

Communities that are compact, walkable and energy-efficient are the goal of a national program being launched today.

It is the first national system for rating the eco-friendliness of entire neighborhoods, says Sophie Lambert of the U.S. Green Building Council. The private group co-wrote the criteria,

which include smart growth and urbanism, for the program: LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) for Neighborhood Development.

By locating stores, restaurants and services close to homes and encouraging people to walk more, such developments lower the risk of obesity, heart disease and hypertension, improve mental health and reduce auto pollution, according to a review by the

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The Obama administration created the Interagency Partnership for Sustainable Communities to promote such projects.

LEED-ND started as a pilot program in 2007, attracting 238 projects. Lambert says 75 have completed at least one of the three phases in the certification process. The program began as cities experienced a housing boom. In

26 of the 50 largest U.S. metro areas, the number of residential building permits more than doubled in the early 2000s compared with the early 1990s.

LEED-ND certification could help developers get construction permits more quickly and attract buyers, says Kaid Benfield of the Natural Resources Defense Council, a private group. The council worked with the Green Building Council and the Congress for the

New Urbanism, which promotes walkable neighborhoods, to create the rating system.

"We want to separate the worthy from the pretenders," Benfield says. Good examples of the worthy, he says, are Twinbrook Station in Rockville, Md., which converted 26 acres of parking lots near a subway stop into housing, shops and office space, and the Melrose redevelopment project in New York's South

Bronx, which will have 2,000 mixed-income housing units when completed.

Benfield says he expects more people will want to live in urban LEED communities, partly because fewer households have children.

Many are eager to reduce their daily commute, he says: "People have had enough of traffic congestion, and they know things can happen to fuel prices."

# 'Elections are all about events' for voters

Continued from 1A

One of Rothenberg's key signals: If Democratic incumbents see their support stuck in the low-40 percentiles — even if their challengers aren't faring better than that — Democrats should expect the worst from a disenchanted electorate. Among other things, Charlie Cook of *The Cook Political Report* keeps his eye on the favorable-unfavorable ratings of the political parties.

## Cover story

"All these things are like that robot in *Lost in Space*," Cook says. "They say, 'Danger, Will Robinson! Danger! Danger!'"

Watch for which candidates have money in the bank, where the president's approval rating stands and what primary results show about the parties' unity and enthusiasm.

With six months to go, here are six key dates that could signal whether Republicans will be celebrating or Democrats breathing sighs of relief on election night:



## Party fractures

For Republicans in Kentucky and Democrats in Arkansas, Senate primaries on May 18 will test how enthusiastic and how divided voters are in each party — critical because midterm elections are all about which voters actually show up.

In Arkansas, the Democratic incumbent is being challenged from the left.

Sen. Blanche Lincoln faces Lt. Gov. Bill Halter, who is backed by several labor unions and the liberal group MoveOn.org. At a televised debate in Little Rock on Friday, Halter blasted her support of the Wall Street bailout and her wavering on the health care bill.

Lincoln replied that she was "taking fire from both extremes" because she was representing the state's interests.

A poll this month by Daily Kos/Research 2000 showed Lincoln leading Halter by 12 percentage points, but in general-election matchups her support never reached higher than 43% — Rothenberg's red flag for incumbents.

Her primary challenge reflects dismay by some liberals who "had real high expectations for the Democratic Congress and President Obama," Cook says. "What you're seeing on the left is a frustration that not nearly what they wanted to see happen has happened." There's no government-run insurance plan in the health care bill, for one thing, and Obama has deployed more troops to Afghanistan.

In Kentucky, the Republican establishment contender is being challenged from the right.

Rand Paul, son of 2008 presidential hopeful Ron Paul, has support from the small-government, anti-Obama "Tea Party" movement in a race against Secretary of State Trey Grayson. The race pits Kentucky Sen. Mitch McConnell, the Senate GOP leader who urged Grayson to run, against Tea Party heroine Sarah Palin, who has endorsed Paul.

The contest will test the Tea Party's strength within the GOP — and, if Paul wins, its ability to win a general election. A SurveyUSA poll this month gave Paul a 15-point lead in the primary.

The movement's energy is "good for Republicans unless... you have such a disproportionate turnout in Republican primaries of really angry voters that they just nominate people who are too far out to win even in a great Republican year," Cook says.

Grayson says Paul's positions — including proposals to eliminate the Commerce, Education and Energy departments — are out of the mainstream. Paul, an ophthalmologist, portrays Grayson as just another politician.

Two other contests will test the direction of the Republican Party. Three-term Sen. Bob Bennett is fighting for his political survival at Utah's Republican convention on May 8. Sen. John McCain, the presidential nominee in 2008, faces a conservative challenger in Arizona's primary on Aug. 24.



## The check is in the mail

Congress finally managed to pass a major health care overhaul last month, but Republicans warn the hard-won achievement could be Democrats' undoing. The Gallup Poll this month found 49% of Americans say it was "a bad thing" that the bill passed; 45% call it "a good thing."

Supporters hope to turn that around with a concerted selling job between now and November that spotlights individual provisions of the law that are popular even among many who oppose the overhaul.

On June 15, for instance, \$250 checks will begin going to seniors who have hit the "doughnut hole" in Medicare's drug plans, a gap in coverage when they are responsible for their full prescription costs. In all, perhaps 8.6 million beneficiaries will receive the checks.

The Internal Revenue Service also has sent postcards to 4 million small businesses, alerting them to a new, retroactive tax credit available to those that provide health insurance for their workers. Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius is pushing insurance companies to immediately begin allowing parents to keep children up to age 26 on their plans, a provision that begins taking effect in September.

Meanwhile, Republicans continue to hammer the law as a big government takeover that will hurt the economy.

"The reality is we need to repeal Obamacare and replace it with the kind of health care reform that will lower the cost of health care without growing the size of government," Indiana Rep. Mike Pence, chairman of the House Republican Conference, said Tuesday. "And House Republicans are determined to be on the side of the American people until we do just that."

Democratic pollster Mark Mellman, who has studied changes in public attitudes toward past health care legislation after enactment, says the new law isn't likely to become a big asset for Democrats this year.

"We have the possibility of changing what is now a slight negative into a neutral or slight positive — not much more than that," he says. However, he adds that opponents who promise to repeal the bill risk a backlash.



## Money in the bank

Money matters. But the key number in campaign-finance reports candidates must file in mid-July won't be much money they've raised or spent. It will be cash on hand — that is, the funds immediately available to buy TV commercials during the campaign's final push.

"When you start to get late in the cycle, it's about how much cash you have in the bank, not

## Campaign committees' cash on hand

Reports filed April 20

	Democrats	Republicans
National committees	\$14.7 million	\$11.4 million
Senate committees	\$17.3 million	\$15 million
House committees	\$26 million	\$9.9 million

Source: Federal Election Commission

how much you've raised," Rothenberg says. "In July, you're going to start spending it."

With the Democrats in power, it's no surprise they have a financial advantage. The Democratic Senate and House campaign committees and the Democratic National Committee have a total of \$21.3 million more in the bank than their Republican counterparts, according to the FEC reports filed this month.

The 41 Democratic incumbents seen as most vulnerable are flush with cash, this month reporting an average of \$1 million of money in the bank, according to an analysis by *Congressional Quarterly*. Still, Republican challengers in 70 districts had at least \$250,000 in the bank, enough to wage competitive races.

Consider two Ohio rematches between Republican challengers and the Democrats who defeated them in 2008.

Former representative Steve Chabot has more than \$800,000 in hand for his race against Democratic Rep. Steve Driehaus, who has \$940,000. Republican Steve Stivers has close to \$800,000 in the bank, only slightly less than Democratic Rep. Mary Jo Kilroy.

Residents in those districts should brace for an onslaught of political ads on TV this fall.



## Got a job?

No economic statistic has more political power than the unemployment rate, now 9.7%. Even those with jobs are nervous: In a Gallup Poll this month, a record one in five working Americans say it's likely they'll lose their job during the next year.

The unemployment for July is released on Aug. 6, just before the fall campaigns begin in earnest and as voter attitudes are beginning to be set.

What matters politically isn't where the jobless rate stands, says Ray Fair, a Yale economist who has studied the relationship between economic statistics and election outcomes. What matters is whether the rate is getting better or worse.

"It's the change in the economy at the time of the election that seems to be more important than the level," he says. "So you go into an election with a fairly high unemployment rate but things are getting better quickly, that's fine. The fact that it's high gets less weight than the fact that it's improving."

Fair, author of *Predicting Presidential Elections and Other Things*, has created a mathematical formula to forecast midterm elections. His latest calculation shows Democrats carrying 51.63% of the overall vote in November, better than today's conventional wisdom.

His formula includes growth and inflation rates for the previous nine months. Attitudes aren't reshaped in the final weeks of an election, he says. "It takes longer for people to adjust their views about the economy than simply one or two or three months."



## Contract negotiations

Six weeks before the 1994 midterms, Republicans released a "Contract With America" detailing eight procedural "reforms" they promised to pass on the first day of Congress and 10 pieces of legislation they would vote on within 100 days if they won control. When they regained the House and Senate, Newt Gingrich, the new Republican speaker, credited the manifesto as a device that connected with voters and helped make the mid-

terms a referendum on Clinton.

Will history repeat itself?

Republicans already are working on a new version to be released in September. They plan to use town hall meetings, the Internet and social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook to solicit ideas from voters before devising a plan for action if they should regain control of Congress again.

"We want to go out and give Americans a voice and actually find solutions," says California Rep. Kevin McCarthy, who is leading the effort to draft what he calls a Commitment to America. "I don't believe that the best answers are in Washington."

Others have borrowed the tactic before. Democrats in 2006 released "Six for '06," with a half-dozen legislative goals they promised to pursue if they regained control. (They did.) Some leaders of the Tea Party movement this month released a Contract From America. It listed 10 priorities from balancing the budget to rejecting a cap-and-trade energy plan that they want candidates to adopt.

McCarthy, who is also in charge of recruiting candidates for the GOP campaign committee, says Republicans "have the opportunity to regain the House" if they make it clear what they then would do. "I believe Republicans can win seats by just saying 'no,' but we have to solve problems and we have to govern if we want to hold the gavel."

It's a tough climate for Democrats, Democratic National Committee Chairman Tim Kaine acknowledges. But he is armed with charts that show the economy improving and says the party has six months left to make its case.

"We're going to hold on to both houses and make sure he (Obama) has the majorities he needs to work with," he says.



## How's Obama doing?

He's not on the ballot, but the month before Election Day, Obama's job-approval rating will help signal what's about to happen to the candidates who are.

An analysis of the last 12 midterm elections by Republican pollster Glen Bolger found results he calls "staggering": Since 1962, when a president's approval rating was 60% or higher in October — there are four examples of that — his party gained an average of one House seat. When it was 50% to 59%, as it had been three times, his party lost an average of 12 seats, a modest setback.

In the five midterms held while a president's approval had dipped below 50%, however, his party suffered calamitous results, losing an average of 41 seats. That's one seat more than Republicans need to win back the House this year.

Obama's approval rating has been on the cusp of 50% since last fall — sometimes up a few points, sometimes down a few. His approval rating was 49% in the daily Gallup Poll released Wednesday.

"If Americans are down on the president, they really take it out on his party in the House," Bolger says. "It's sending a message of, 'Stop, you're going a little too far or a lot too far.'"

By voting for the other side, they "leaven the power in Washington."

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