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Long-Term Planning At City Hall
by Tom Angotti
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City Hall recently unveiled two new efforts to look at the long-term future of the city. On September 21, the Mayor's Office announced the creation of a new Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability, with a 16-person Advisory Board. Rolled out during Mayor Michael Bloomberg's visit with California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, the initiative is billed as part of "an ambitious environmental agenda for New York City."

The other effort, unceremoniously leaked to the press in recent weeks, proves to be no less ambitious. "Visions for New York City: Housing and the Public Realm" is a report to New York City's Economic Development Corporation, dated May 2006, by former City Planning Commissioner Alex Garvin (best known for his role in the beginning of the effort to rebuild Lower Manhattan.) The report proposes 400,000 new units of private housing by 2030 by building platforms over rail yards and highway cuts, converting industrial waterfront property, and building new surface mass transit lines to spur private housing development. The report also calls for green boulevards, protected bicycle lanes, Sunday street closings, and new pedestrian streets to "improve the quality of life" and support higher density development.

The new office and the Garvin report are about one and the same objective: opening up opportunities for future growth. The city's growth advocates and powerful real estate industry seem to be coming around to the view that ambitious development goals like those set out in the Garvin report will never be achieved unless they're part of a bigger, long-term planning strategy that pays attention to the environment.

The Garvin Report: Envisioning A Growth Agenda

For years now community leaders have been after city officials to plan for the long-term future and not just rezone their neighborhoods for new development. The Task Force on Community-based Planning, a coalition of some 40 community organizations, community boards and professionals created five years ago, has stood behind the scores of neighborhood-based planning efforts. It asked city officials to support them, prompting the city government to do both city-wide and neighborhood-level planning.

But the main impetus for Alex Garvin's visions report, and City Hall's newfound interest in long-range planning, seems to be a realization among real estate developers that the city's infrastructure, especially mass transit, can't support a lot more growth in Manhattan and at existing transit hubs. While the number of riders of mass transit continues to grow, the system hasn't added any major new lines since the 1930s; New Yorkers have among the longest average commute times in the nation. As a result, Garvin proposes new "transit-oriented development." This would entail building new light rail, streetcar and bus rapid transit lines in areas that would be rezoned to spur private housing development. Two priority areas are identified: 3rd Avenue and 161st St. in the Bronx and 21st Street in Queens (with the possibility of continuing the line south to Red Hook in Brooklyn). The report gives no indication that existing community-based plans were consulted in the search for future development sites.

Garvin found that many of the lower-density areas of the city with available land for development lack mass transit and are not likely to attract investment in new housing. Instead, he believes investors will go to more centrally-located areas where developable parcels can be created by incentives and changes in land use policy. This would include, for example, building on platforms over the Sunnyside Rail Yards in Queens and the Brooklyn Queens Expressway in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn. Waterfronts targeted for redevelopment are the Bronx River, Harlem River, and the North Shore of Staten Island. These are the strategic areas that would absorb most of future development, according to Garvin's study.

But this top-down approach to planning is bound to raise questions in the neighborhoods. Garvin rejects starting from an analysis of "needs," as most community-based plans do, and instead talks about "opportunities," basically investment opportunities. He ignores the environmental consequences of building over highways. He claims there will be no displacement, but ignores the effects that increasing property values and rents will have on surrounding areas – that is, secondary or indirect displacement. And he neglects the issue of housing affordability. It is the kind of planning that is likely to produce instant resistance at the grass roots level. Neighborhood planning

involving local residents and businesses (who also tend to be pro-development, as any survey of neighborhood plans will show) is more likely to find development opportunities that fit better with the existing urban context and also help to address needs.

To its credit, the Garvin report puts forth a bold set of recommendations about public space and transportation that will resonate with many community planning advocates. The section on "the public realm" says that "a fundamental shift needs to occur in planning and capital investment for streets." The city should rely less on cars and develop "a more balanced public realm." This includes greening boulevards so they are friendlier to pedestrians. Bicycle lanes would be upgraded from stripes painted on the pavement to safer, physically separated rights-of-way. Following the example of cities in Europe, Latin America and elsewhere, selected avenues would be closed to traffic on Sundays, creating giant public spaces. Ocean Parkway in Brooklyn, Broadway in Manhattan, Grand Concourse in the Bronx, and Kent Avenue/Vernon Boulevard in Brooklyn and Queens are some examples given. Finally, active neighborhood retail streets like Seventh Avenue in Park Slope, Brooklyn, would be reclaimed as pedestrian streets.

Will The New Office Of Long-Term Planning And Sustainability Be Sustainable?

While the Garvin report only sketches out broad proposals and it is not clear what the current administration will embrace or reject, the huge leap in housing growth that it foresees inevitably leads to many bigger questions. How will the city's already-strained transit, water, sewer and utility infrastructure handle all the new growth? What about the schools, libraries, and health facilities? While part of the transportation problem would be solved by improving the public realm and reducing traffic, it is bound to take a great deal of public investment and many more strategies to improve energy efficiency and environmental quality. And is anyone trying to insure that the costs and benefits of development are equitably distributed?

The new Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability promises to grapple with some of these hard questions. Paraphrasing the classical United Nations definition, Mayor Michael Bloomberg stated: "Sustainability is all about ensuring that economic growth and development today is compatible with the ability of our children and grandchildren to meet their needs in the future."

If the new office is true to the sustainability mandate, they must take the "needs-based" approach that the Garvin report rejected. The ambitious agenda of the new office includes reducing the city's greenhouse gas emissions and exploring new strategies for energy efficiency in government and the private sector. Moving beyond City Hall's successful High Performance Housing Initiative, the office proposes to make "green building" more widespread.

But while conserving energy and cleaning up the environment will create more opportunities for housing development, it remains to be seen how much the long-range planners will be looking at existing neighborhoods and the enormous environmental and public health crises they face, including asthma, lead poisoning, obesity and diabetes. To what extent will they be clearing the way for the pristine new housing enclaves foreseen in the Garvin report without addressing the profound deficiencies and inequalities in the quality of life that already divide the city? And with only a few years left in this administration's mandate, to what extent can the long-range planners engage the city's hundreds of diverse neighborhoods in the planning process so that whatever gets decided actually has a chance to be implemented in the decades to come? Will the new office have the time to change the deeply imbedded agency cultures that resist sustainable development strategies – for example, a Department of Transportation that resists traffic reduction and a Department of Sanitation that opposes waste reduction? While doing its share in the war against global warming, City Hall could also make peace with its own neighborhood planners.

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