Is the Long-term Sustainability Plan Sustainable?
by Tom Angotti
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PlaNYC could benefit from more collaboration in the planning process.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg's unprecedented long-term sustainability plan for New York City, PlaNYC2030, is a year old. But the failure (at least for now) of what the mayor's office declared to be a keystone of the plan -- congestion pricing in Manhattan -- should lead to some serious reflection about how to create a workable long-term plan for the city.

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As the State Assembly refused to even hold a vote on the plan to charge people a fee to drive in Manhattan, the mayor blamed elected officials in Albany. His opponents faulted the mayor's proposal and tactics.

Whatever the merits of congestion pricing, its defeat reveals a fundamental flaw in the mayor's approach to long-term planning that was obvious to many urban planners from the start. The plan was prepared by the mayor's staff and a team of outside consultants, and designed in such a way that civic, environmental and neighborhood groups could not truly engage with the administration in a two-way dialogue about the plan. In scores of public forums and focus groups, people from the mayor's office offered presentations showcasing the plan and asked people who attended to submit their comments. It was a one-way, top-down process. There was no conversation, and the decisions about what to put in the plan remained in City Hall. As a result, grassroots support for the plan,

and congestion pricing, was limited to passive assent and a more enthusiastic core of environmental groups.

Why Process Matters

Why should it make any difference how the plan was developed? If it's a good plan, why not just line up and move on? Unfortunately, that was the message coming from City Hall about congestion pricing, and it didn't work. While many of the other 146 proposals in the mayor's plan are also good ones, they too will go nowhere fast unless top-down planning in City Hall can meet bottom-up planning in the city's neighborhoods on an equal footing. And many of the proposals in the plan would have been even stronger from the start if they had been enriched by lively public discussions and debates. That kind of debate improved the congestion pricing plan, making it simpler than when originally proposed and adding provisions for residential parking and help for lower income New Yorkers who drive into Manhattan. This indicates that even if discussions take much more time -- and the congestion pricing debate took almost a year -- they are a fundamental part of the planning process and should not be cut short.

With only 20 months left in the mayor's term, the big question now is what parts of the plan will survive into the next administration? Will term limits limit the dreams of long-term planning? The answer to these questions will depend on the large pool of civic, environmental and neighborhood groups that for a long time has proposed long-term solutions to the city's problems and so applauded the mayor's plan, but were left to play second fiddle in the new City Hall concert. Mayor Bloomberg can accomplish many things in 20 months just by using financial resources normally available to the executive branch, only to see the next mayor change priorities and divert resources.

Origins of PlaNYC

The problems with the planning process go back to the administration's first attempts at long-term planning. After challenges to many large-scale projects directed by then-Deputy Mayor Daniel Doctoroff (remember the Jets stadium), the city's Economic Development Corporation hired former City Planning Commissioner Alex Garvin to prepare a study of long-term growth opportunities and constraints in the city. This study, dated May 2006, assumed there would be a million new people by the year 2030, and found opportunities for new high-density neighborhoods along the city's industrial waterfront and on top of rail yards and roadways. Garvin's bold vision was accompanied by proposals to create new public spaces and improve mass transit to support new growth, obvious concerns of both real estate investors as well as current residents.

The Garvin plan was sketchy in many respects and if it had been put forth as a land use plan for the city it would surely have met with some harsh criticism by neighborhoods, particularly those already bearing the brunt of massive real estate speculation and megaprojects. Some of the opposition would have been knee-jerk not-in-my-backyard sentiment but some would have been rooted in serious skepticism about the ability of the city to provide adequate services, protect existing residents from displacement and deal with the long-term environmental consequences of growth. The Garvin plan was a growth plan and only suggested how environmental impacts could be addressed. It was commissioned without public input and, significantly, was done by the mayor's economic development office and not the City Planning Department or City Planning Commission.

Without public discussion, the Garvin plan became the foundation for PlaNYC2030. Months later, in September 2006, the mayor created an Office of Long Term Planning and Sustainability, placing it within his Office of Operations, and an advisory group. Seven months later, on Earth Day 2007, they unveiled PlaNYC2030.

City Planning Outsourced

The 2030 plan appears to have been largely prepared by a management consulting team under contract with the city's Economic Development Corporation. Calls to the corporation confirmed this, but we were told we could not obtain a copy of the contract without filing a Freedom of Information petition. The firm, McKinsey & Company, is one of the largest that serves global corporations, and Rohit Aggarwala, director of the mayor's Long-Term Planning and Sustainability Office, was hired directly from McKinsey.

The plan looks more like a strategic planning report for a big company anxious to save money on energy than a blueprint for city government. It was marketed like a corporate strategic plan, replete with full-color charts, a Web site, focus groups and "stakeholder" meetings throughout the city. The mayor's office and consultants locked up

the planning process, and when they finished their work, it was taken around town for viewing.

While the mayor's office organized focus groups to test its ideas, the plan was never officially approved, as long-term plans are in other New York municipalities and just about everywhere in the nation. In New York City there is a clearly defined process for approving plans, outlined in Section 197-a of the City Charter, our constitution. Plans should be presented to the community boards (there are 59 in the city), borough presidents, City Planning Commission and City Council. At each step, there are required public hearings and votes. Borough presidents and City Council members are elected, and can speak for local constituencies not represented in a highly centralized government run by a single powerful mayor. Community boards are appointed but they are the only official form of neighborhood-level governance, in neighborhoods that average 135,000 people. None of these bodies was consulted. In addition, there are many community-based organizations, civic and advocacy groups that usually take part in the process and were not involved in any significant way.

Missing: Planning at the Neighborhood Level

In general, bottom-up, neighborhood level planning is alive and well in New York City. The Municipal Art Society's Atlas of Community-based Plans shows that there are over 80 community plans, many of them both visionary and inclusive. They were often developed when neighborhood activists felt city government was not responsive to their needs.

Some issues critical to communities are notably absent from PlaNYC: affordable housing preservation, waste management, industrial retention, living wages, noise, public health crises like obesity and HIV/AIDS, education, immigration, and discrimination. Critical issues like traffic and parking throughout the boroughs seem to have been submerged by congestion pricing for Manhattan and a far-off promise of bus rapid transit. And the plan never spells out the real-world impact on neighborhoods of its citywide initiatives.

In community-level planning, neighborhoods confront the ways that global issues play out in a very real and tangible way on the ground as they affect the daily lives of people. PlaNYC instead uses quantitative metrics that fail to resonate with the everyday lives of people in their communities. For example, PlaNYC sets a goal that every city resident should be within a 10-minute walk from a park. As New Yorkers for Parks has pointed out, however, the goal is so broad that it has little meaning for communities planning to make green space accessible for all. Many people need public space on the block where they live, and for some people even a 10-minute walk is too much. Many green spaces serve regional recreation needs but do little for people living next door.

PlaNYC's methodology is linear, dealing with simple cause-effect relations that may have little to do with complex neighborhood-based visions. For example, planting a million trees would reduce greenhouse gases by a quantifiable amount. Congestion pricing would reduce car trips by a predictable percentage. But as the congestion pricing debate proved, it is simply not enough to make one isolated change a city priority when its local impacts are not clear. This kind of "results-oriented" thinking ignores the complexity of life in the city and is especially unsuited to a multicultural city where many, perhaps even a majority of residents, find this approach to be alien. Within African, Asian and Native American thinking, for example, there are powerful holistic theories that integrate instead of disaggregate the human experience. And environmental justice advocates have long criticized how some measures touted as good for everyone in the city actually have different effects from neighborhood to neighborhood and reinforce inequalities.

Is the Honeymoon Over?

One year since the launching of PlaNYC2030, the time has come for supporters of sustainability and long-term planning to go beyond simply patting the Bloomberg administration on the back for all the good things in the mayor's plan and move on to serious discussions. While the city is the better for the unprecedented launching of a public discussion about sustainability in the policy arena, we should not forget that New York is decades behind other cities in Europe and the United States when it comes to long-term sustainability planning.

As we contemplate next steps some people might prefer to see PlaNYC2030 fade away in order to save long-term sustainability. Unfortunately, this could set back any future efforts to address long-term environmental and public health issues. Rather, the best antidote to this understandable frustration is to intensify the public discussion about sustainability in New York City, measuring the progress being made and giving both credit and criticism to the mayor and city agencies when due. Moving the debate beyond public relations and campaign

rhetoric can, in turn, lead to a genuine top-down/bottom-up dialogue about how to construct a long-term plan for the city that is sustainable for generations to come. This is the objective of Sustainability Watch, a project of Gotham Gazette and Hunter College's Center for Community Planning & Development. May a thousand flowers bloom on Earth Day!

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