

## **PlaNYC: A Model of Public Participation or Corporate Marketing?**

**By Brian Paul**

On the third anniversary of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's PlaNYC 2030, the Mayor's Office released a [report](#) titled "The Process behind PlaNYC: How the City of New York Developed its Long-Term Sustainability Plan." The report describes PlaNYC's outreach and public participation methods in glowing terms, asserting that New York City is a pioneer when it comes to including people in the planning process.

After peeling away the superlatives and gushing praises, the report looks like nothing more than a slick package of images with testimony from government and business leaders friendly to the mayor. Behind the aggressive branding, however, there is very little hard evidence to back up its conclusions. The report may have intended to respond to the criticisms of the planning process for being too top-down and technocratic, but it raises more questions because of its own one-sided bias. (For critiques, see <http://redesign.gothamgazette.com/article/landuse/20110511/12/3525> and <http://www.gothamgazette.com/article/landuse/20100412/12/3239/>).

### **An Independent Study?**

The glowing report is co-written and endorsed by The International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives ([ICLEI](#)), the leading membership organization of local governments concerned with sustainability and climate change. ICLEI is an influential international advocate for sustainability and in co-writing this report, officially lent its seal of approval to the PlaNYC 2030 model. Instead of analyzing and proposing solutions to improve the PlaNYC process, ICLEI proclaims it as the "gold standard for big-city sustainability plans" because of the "comprehensive scope of the plan, the extensive planning process, and the broad public outreach performed by the City."<sup>i</sup> (ICLEI 2010: 8, 9).

By making strengths out of the very areas that advocates have pinpointed as weaknesses without actually engaging their critiques, ICLEI is complicit in a clear act of public relations "spin" that makes the Bloomberg administration look like a paragon of community participation. This raises serious questions about ICLEI's legitimacy as an advocate for sustainability planning, much less its capacity to do good research.

The entire tone and content of the report reads like a public relations fluff piece for Mayor Bloomberg rather than an objective account of the PlaNYC process. From the start the report repeatedly parrots talking points from the Mayor's Office such as the list of top PlaNYC achievements, many of which have proven to be misleading. For example, I have shown how the claim that the City's "transit oriented rezonings" have contributed anything to sustainability is highly questionable (<http://www.gothamgazette.com/article/transportation/20100421/16/3247/>). Others have questioned claims of gains in affordable housing by showing that far more affordable

housing units have been lost under Mayor Bloomberg's tenure than were created by his programs (see [http://furmancenter.org/files/publications/Key\\_Findings.pdf](http://furmancenter.org/files/publications/Key_Findings.pdf))

Parts of the ICLEI report read like an epistle promoting Mayor Bloomberg's ideology of government as a business, with statements like, "a City, like a business, needs a long-term strategic plan" and "staff must communicate and package ideas skillfully and make sure the public is on board with major proposals" (ICLEI 2010: 9). This kind of rhetoric leads to an explicit endorsement of the corporate strategic planning model and manipulative public relations and not meaningful citizen participation. A quote from former Deputy Mayor Daniel Doctoroff, a key figure in the creation of PlaNYC, claims "we actually looked at the city almost block by block, neighborhood by neighborhood, system by system, out 23 years. That is long term planning" (ICLEI 2010: 10). However, in Doctoroff's corporate parlance, planning appears to be all about looking at numbers, spreadsheets and statistical models. In PlaNYC2030 there are no neighborhood specific policies to be found anywhere and any New Yorker paying attention to the planning knows there was no effort by the "planners" to canvas these areas in person or speak to local residents and civic leaders.

Angotti's (2008) contention that PlaNYC's concept of "sustainability" is primarily a public relations effort to package and brand what is actually a strategic real estate growth plan appears to be verified by this report's own account of the process:

Initially, the City set out to develop a strategic land use plan, but as the Mayor and his staff realized that sustainability was the common theme that tied everything together, the plan evolved into a sustainability plan" (ICLEI 2010: 13)

Critics of PlaNYC 2030 have repeatedly pointed out the problems with PlaNYC's land use and economic development focus. It largely ignores issues of equity and diversity and the importance of regional economic networks. It does not address the need for urban industrial space and its abstract quantitative goals do not relate well to the complex experiences of local communities (APA NY Chapter 2007, Angotti 2008, Finn 2008). But the ICLEI report makes no note of these criticisms, nor does it question the plan's foundation as a strategic land use plan. It blindly encourages other cities to replicate the same process without letting history decide whether it was effective or not.

Despite an admission that the plan originated as a land use strategy prepared by scions of the business world and overseen by a 17 member "advisory board" that included only one planner and five leaders from the real estate industry (ICLEI 2010: 21), its participatory process is held up as the "gold standard." The report claims it was "methodical, transparent, inclusive, and comprehensive" (*id* 6) and "surpassed any other outreach effort recently undertaken by the city" (*id* 25).

In reality, public participation in PlaNYC 2030 was an afterthought that was initiated only when the Mayor's office realized it was a necessary component of selling the plan to the public (*id* 19). The ICLEI report candidly admits that the plan was already being written when the outreach process began in the Fall of 2006 (*id* 35). And the outreach

efforts fell well short of best practices in public participation, involving only meetings with hand-picked non-profit organizations and policy experts and 11 public town hall presentations where the Mayor's slideshow was presented, followed by limited questions from the audience (*id* 23-27).

This model of participation falls under the category of "participation by consultation: "people participating by being consulted or by answering questions...such a consultative process does not concede any share in decision-making and professionals are under no obligation to take on board the people's view" (Pretty 1995, as quoted in Cornwall 2008: 272). The same author states that best practices in public participation are "interactive participation -- people participating in joint analysis, development of action plans, and formation or strengthening of local institutions," with the community "taking control of local decisions...so they have a stake in maintaining structures or practices" (Pretty 1995, as quoted in Cornwall 2008: 272).

Turning away from the extensive literature on public participation, the ICLEI report explicitly elevates PlaNYC's flawed process to the status of "best practices," encouraging local governments to use it "for guidance, ideas and inspiration to craft their own planning process" (ICLEI 2010: 47). This sets a dangerous precedent for an organization that is looked to for advice from local governments all over the world. Experts on public policy and urban planning agree that support and involvement of the general public is critically important to generating the fundamental shifts in attitudes and practices that must be achieved in order to adequately address climate change (Roseland 2005, De Souza Briggs 2008, Angotti 2008). As Roseland asserts, "Sustainable development must be participatory development. Real visions for change rarely come from government or from the market place but from civil society" (Roseland 2005, 27).

PlaNYC 2030 is a top-down bureaucratic initiative with little community involvement and "buy-in" and is not well-integrated with the rest of city policy-making. Its dependence on the mayor and lack of integration with other city policies leave the plan vulnerable to dismissal by future politicians. For example, Miami's "MiPlan," developed in 2008 with a similar top-down process, was supposed to have been followed by a more detailed implementation plan within a year. But Miami's new Mayor Tomas Regalado appears to have abandoned the MiPlan after campaigning on a message of "back to the basics" and "no grand plans" (Rabin 2009).

By enshrining the PlaNYC 2030 model as "best practices" ICLEI is contributing to a flawed notion of sustainability in which it is merely a set of technical goals that can be arrived at through top-down, corporate, bureaucratic management. In the long run, this could stymie real progress on sustainability when it's most needed.

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<sup>i</sup> The report states it is "Written by ICLEI—Local Governments for Sustainability USA In association with The Mayor's Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability, City of New York." ICLEI and the Mayor's Office are given equal credit in the "about the authors" paragraphs that describes what they do. On the back cover, two staff members from ICLEI are credited as the primary authors. "The writing team for this case study consisted of the following individuals from ICLEI—Local Governments for Sustainability,

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