

New York's Sustainability Plan: Trailblazer or Copycat?

By Paige Cowett

New York City's PlaNYC for the first time put long-term sustainability on New York City's policy agenda. But considering that many other large cities launched their sustainability agendas long ago, is New York just playing catch-up or copycat? It is clearly not the trailblazer in comprehensive long-term planning for cities, and in some ways its belated entry into the world of sustainability is underwhelming.

Since the 1987 United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development that defined sustainability as meeting current needs without compromising the needs of future generations, many European countries like Holland, Sweden and Norway have integrated sustainability into their longstanding practices of comprehensive planning at national, regional and local levels. Hundreds of cities around the world used the language of sustainability to introduce the environment into their urban plans in new ways. Following the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, hundreds of municipalities around the world launched "Agenda 21" initiatives that established sustainability principles and policies for the 21st century.

Unfortunately, cities in the United States have had to address sustainability issues on their own given the void in leadership in both urban and environmental policy at the national level. Very few U.S. cities launched Agenda 21 initiatives. Nevertheless, several cities in the U.S. recognized quite some time ago that they needed to plan to meet the challenges of population growth, energy, the environment, and global climate change. San Francisco, Seattle, Boston, and Portland (Oregon), for example, launched public discussions about sustainability in the 1990s. While these cities are much smaller than New York and not comparable in some ways, Los Angeles has much in common with Gotham, and it also appears to be lagging. Though for a long time the State of California has been far ahead of New York in environmental policy, Los Angeles barely beat us to the sustainability starting line. The Los Angeles plan (GreenLA) was released in 2007.

London – a city more comparable to New York City in many ways -- began developing a sustainability plan seven years ago in response to the 1999 European Spatial Development Perspective calling on European cities to focus on sustainability. The London Plan was released in 2004.

New York, London and Los Angeles are international cities with vital roles in the global economy and growing populations. This working paper compares the London and Los Angeles sustainability agendas to PlaNYC, highlighting the significant differences in approach. Two conclusions stand out from the comparison.

First, PlaNYC fails to address economic equality and social inclusion as the London plan does. Second, PlaNYC is limited in some ways by the constraints on the authority of New York City's government in New York State.

PlaNYC, The London Plan and GreenLA

Goals and guiding principles shape the planning process and the recommendations of these three long-term plans. But even if there is some overlap, Los Angeles and London have emphasized different goals than New York City. By looking at the different goals and principles of each of these three plans, we find some interesting lessons for New York.

Despite the city's late start, PlaNYC aims to establish New York as the "first sustainable 21st century city." (p. 141) It identifies three main challenges: "growth, an aging infrastructure, and increasingly precarious environment." (p. 4) To address these challenges, the plan outlines 127 initiatives covering water and air quality, energy planning, climate change, open space, housing, transportation and land use. Its emphasis is on the physical city and how the physical city can in turn "unleash opportunity."

PlaNYC is premised on the assumption that the city will add almost one million residents to its roughly 8 million by 2030, and since everything else flows from this assumption it is first and foremost a plan for growth. The London Plan is also a growth plan; GreenLA is more focused on addressing existing environmental hazards and the sustainable and efficient management of resources. Los Angeles expects significant population growth (300,000 additional residents beyond the current population of 4 million) and the surrounding areas in Los Angeles County (including Santa Monica, the San Fernando Valley, and others) are also expected to grow. Yet the LA plan is less about facilitating growth and more about addressing environmental problems. GreenLA is more of a strategy for greater efficiency and equality in the management of resources than the New York plan. This may have something to do with Los Angeles' past long-term successes in improving air quality and overall efficiency while dealing with population growth. The city has consistently lowered carbon emissions even while the population was growing. From 1990-2004, there was a decrease in emissions of almost 5% while population grew by 400,000. PlaNYC notes that the city's greenhouse gas emissions rose by 5% from 2000 to 2005, a period when population grew by 130,265.

The London Plan and Social Inclusion

The London Plan, while focusing on sustainable development and growth, explicitly prioritizes social inclusion and reduction of the gap between rich and poor. This goal comes from the guiding document, the European Spatial Perspective, and is reinforced by the plan's recommendations. Because this is a guiding principle, The London Plan, while still a growth plan, looks very different from PlaNYC, which fails to address social inclusion and the gap between rich and poor. There is no discussion of race and economic disadvantage in a city that is one of the most segregated in the U.S., has over a million people requiring some form of food assistance, and is losing affordable housing at an unprecedented rate. The closest PlaNYC comes to addressing the disparities in economic opportunity is in the call for affordable housing development, but that is seen as a matter of increasing the supply of housing units rather than one of achieving social equity.

London mayor Ken Livingstone set forth three basic priorities for the Plan:

- Strong and diverse economic growth
- Social inclusivity to allow all Londoners to share in London's future success
- Fundamental improvements in environmental management and the use of resources

Similar to PlaNYC, the London Plan projects a significant population growth (700,000 additional people by 2016) and is presented primarily as a growth plan. The London Plan includes various land use, transportation, housing and economic growth initiatives, but unlike PlaNYC it is guided by a larger policy framework. In addition to the 1999 European Spatial Development Perspective and The Greater London Authority Act, the plan follows pre-existing directives that establish the goals of balanced and sustainable development, in particular by strengthening economic and social cohesion.

The London Plan places significant emphasis on job growth, developing green industries, and most important, prioritizing social equality so that all Londoners benefit from development. For example, the London Plan includes a strategy to make childcare more accessible and affordable in an effort to support equality in the workplace for many women to whom childcare is a barrier to work. Inequality in the workforce, the plan argues, is a barrier to social cohesion and therefore in conflict with the goals for the plan and the city. Other initiatives to address inequalities in the workforce aim to eliminate "labor market discrimination and the mismatch between labor supply and demand, focusing on key target groups and communities living within London's most disadvantaged areas." (p. 121) The London Plan promises a more concerted effort to reduce discrimination and argues that "action is also required to improve mobility, access to information, appropriate training, jobs brokers and recruitment networks and to change the attitudes of employers to the provision of training and the recruitment of unemployed people in general, and more specifically, those disadvantaged in the labor market including older people." (p. 121) These issues are largely ignored in PlaNYC, though they are just as relevant to New Yorkers.

PlaNYC conspicuously omits planning for economic development and job growth and instead suggests that improving the physical city will necessarily lead to economic opportunity. Instead of a strategy for industrial retention, stability in the service sector, and a diverse local economy, PlaNYC positions large housing and commercial developments in central business districts as the engine to spur economic opportunity.

PlaNYC explicitly states its concern only with the physical city and does not discuss the complex local economy or efforts to address poverty, crime, education and other social services. Jobs are central to population growth and the physical changes a city must make to accommodate more people. It is curious that the plan that was largely the product of the City's Economic Development Corporation (and not the Department of City Planning) lacks an economic development plan. New York's omission of economic development sets it apart from the Los Angeles and London, and points to some other underlying problems.

PlaNYC also misses obvious opportunities to create jobs while mitigating climate change – for example, by incentivizing the creation of green industries. The call for a “greener, greater New York” includes no mention of “green collar industries,” one of the more significant measures now being proposed elsewhere to link environment and economic development. Nor does it mention the people who will account for much of the city’s growth – new immigrants. This economic development piece would be crucial if social equity were a priority. Creating new local jobs and supporting the workforce to be prepared for those new jobs can provide new opportunities at all economic levels. If the plan had addressed the question of who will benefit from development, these issues might have been given some attention.

While Mayor Bloomberg looked to London for guidance in developing PlaNYC, it seems that what caught his fancy were details like congestion pricing instead of basic principles such as economic development or social inclusion. Perhaps the attempt to apply congestion pricing – the policy of charging a fee to reduce traffic in the city – in New York City did not get approved by the state legislature because it was removed from the larger context of transportation planning. Cities all over the world have tried to implement similar strategies with varying success, but in New York congestion pricing crashed and burned because it was not part of a larger long-term strategy for traffic management. For decades London had implemented measures to reduce traffic and parking in the center of the city, and has in place a decent bus system. As a result, traffic in the center of the city had been declining, and congestion pricing was seen as one more instrument in a panoply of measures to reduce traffic. In New York City, the trend has been just the opposite, so a measure like congestion pricing signaled a major shift in policy, not an incremental change, and therefore would require more extended discussion and debate than the mayor anticipated.

Differences in Governance Structures

The differences between New York and London are further complicated by important differences in governing structures. The Mayor of London essentially had the authority to implement congestion pricing without approval from higher levels of government. The mayor’s power is well established, in particular when it comes to transportation policy. In New York City, where city and state legislative approval is required, a different approach was needed. The initiative failed in New York because City Hall failed to leave room in the process for input from constituent groups and some important political leaders in the state until it was too late. And if PlaNYC had prioritized social inclusion, there might have been a better chance to build consensus around the final proposal, with at least some of the groups that felt that congestion pricing served only a privileged few.

The Los Angeles Plan and Greening the Ports

While the City of Los Angeles contains half as many people in about the same amount of space as New York City, and cars are more common than mass transit, the two cities have much in common. They both have very active real estate markets and face similar

challenges with regard to affordable housing, air quality and climate change. GreenLA, however, has a greater focus on social equality and the creation of economic opportunities by greening the city. This social and economic focus, in addition to a legacy of innovation from the past, and the city's unique position in the regional economy, have put them in a position to offer the kind of bold goals that New York could emulate.

Both the Los Angeles and New York City regions have large port facilities that contribute significantly to the region's carbon footprint. This includes freight that travels by truck, ship, and air. But one significant difference between Los Angeles and New York is that LA is home to the largest (Port of Los Angeles) and second largest (Port of Long Beach) ports in the country. Together they bring in 43% of all U.S. imports. Many imports pass through the City of Los Angeles by diesel-fueled trucks to other parts of the country. And while the ports provide many jobs (well over one million) and significant economic benefits (over \$55 billion in annual wages and tax revenues) to the region, they have significant negative environmental effects.

But the City of Los Angeles has direct control over its port operations, unlike New York City. The Port of Los Angeles is a proprietary department of the City of Los Angeles. The authority serving New York City is the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (PANYNJ) in which the governor of each state appoints six members to the Board of Commissioners, subject to state senate approval, and the governors have veto power over Commission decisions. This shared governance structure was the result of conflicts between New York and New Jersey in the early part of the 20th century, and the Port Authority developed into an independent power. One consequence of this is that there are more barriers to comprehensive long-term planning in New York.

The relative independence of the PANYNJ is one among several examples of major energy users (and polluters) that serve the city and are excluded from recognition in PlaNYC. The carbon footprint for New York City should include the energy used in the ports because they are essential to maintaining the population and economy of the city. But the city is not responsible for energy use or emissions in the port, and it has limited authority to direct policy. Los Angeles, on the other hand, is the only municipality with authority over the Port of Los Angeles. Only 2 of 127 initiatives in PlaNYC involve the PANYNJ, and while PlaNYC calls for the city to work with PANYNJ to create a plan to reduce emissions from the various ports, this is not slated to start until 2009. If there were a stronger partnership between the City of New York and the PANYNJ, this might already have been underway.

This is yet another example where the power of the City of New York to affect change is limited by an outmoded and cumbersome governance structure. Because the role of the Port Authority is crucial to New York's air quality and our real carbon footprint, not to mention the security of the food supply and economy, the plan should recognize that the city is only the geographic center of a major metropolitan region. The City of New York has less than half the region's total population and a third of the region's land area.

Regional Water and Power

Thus the LA plan illustrates the advantage of a regional approach when it comes to the ports. The same can be said for energy planning.

While New York City controls almost all of its own water supply through a single agency, it has very little to say about energy. Los Angeles controls the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP), the utility providing water and power to the entire city. Los Angeles has in the pipeline many alternative energy projects that will offset fossil fuel carbon emissions in energy production, including wind farms and other wind projects, accounting for about 13% of their total power generation by 2009-2010, and solar projects that will account for about 5%. The goal is to generate 20% from renewable sources by 2010 and 35% by 2030.

PlaNYC's goals are clearly not as bold and it does not have explicit benchmarks for reaching its goals. In fact, the plan says, "Between now and 2015, the City will mostly rely on conventional, clean energy sources to increase supply, but we will work to set the stage for renewable energies such as solar, wind and tidal power to play a larger role in the future" (p. 110). Today the city receives about 6% from the state's renewable energy sources and the state has committed to ensure that 25% of its energy comes from renewable sources by 2013. Solar energy poses unique challenges for the city because of the many tall buildings. The wiring and other logistics of solar equipment are cost prohibitive, and PlaNYC is vague and noncommittal in stating that the City will employ "a range of strategies to develop a more competitive market." (p. 112)

LADWP can do what New York City cannot by constructing their own projects, buying existing or newly built renewable facilities, entering joint ventures with neighboring municipal utilities, and, even using long-term power purchase agreements. Including the LADWP, all municipal operations account for 30% of total city carbon emissions, and because of this the City of LA has a way to reach citywide energy efficiency goals. However, LA faces a different challenge because a larger proportion of carbon emissions (50% compared to 20% in New York) come from cars and trucks. Without a mass transit system as extensive as New York's, bringing down these emissions will be daunting. LA's strategies prioritize improvement of the transit system by expanding the rail network and making their transit information more accessible. They will utilize new technologies to reduce congestion including better synchronization of traffic signals. Like New York City, they are supporting Transit Oriented Development (TOD), high-density and mixed use developments located near transit hubs, but this approach is much more meaningful in LA than New York, where practically all development is bound to be built near mass transit.

In New York City, fueling and lighting buildings are responsible for roughly 80% of carbon emissions and 40% of local air pollution. The city is beholden to fossil fuels because it does not control the power plants. Since the deregulation of the power industry in 1998, private companies have controlled power generation. Con Edison, a previously regulated monopoly, was ordered to sell its power plants to create a competitive

electricity market in New York, and private developers and owners are now able to control the construction and management of power plants. If there is no profit in building clean power plants, they won't be built under this deregulated structure. PlaNYC states that with the rising cost of oil, the city will rely increasingly on natural gas, but with the recent blockage of the Broadwater LNG construction project by Governor Paterson (the passage of which plaNYC seemed to count on) and the rising cost of and difficulty in delivering natural gas, this option has its own set of problems. Alternative energy sources like solar and wind are barely on the city's energy map.

PlaNYC acknowledges these limitations and laments the impasse by saying:

There is no entity capable of addressing these challenges. There are eight organizations responsible for some dimension of energy planning in New York City, but not one of them is designed to take the city's unique needs into account. None are empowered to bargain on behalf of New Yorkers, while prioritizing air quality, lowering global-warming emissions, and ensuring affordable prices. And there is no existing planning body that analyzes how supply and demand-side strategies can work together to achieve reliable power for the city (p. 102).

In response to this situation, the city plans to create the NYC Energy Planning Board to oversee a new entity that will coordinate energy efficiency efforts in the city. This will require an amendment to the city charter and an increase to the customer surcharge, not to mention a whole lot of political will. The fundamental problem, however, is the deregulation of ConEdison and too much control in the hands of private companies that have very little incentive to build cleaner burning power plants.

Green Buildings?

80% of pollution in New York City comes from the use of energy in buildings. The city is about to release a revised building code that will require more energy efficient building systems. It has also launched a public education campaign to encourage individual and household participation in conserving energy. But the building code applies to new construction and, as illustrated by the current spate of construction site disasters, the Department of Buildings has a limited capacity when it comes to enforcement, and relies on the self-certification of compliance rather than inspections.

Perhaps if the city spent as much time and effort on energy use in existing buildings as it did on congestion pricing, it could achieve larger gains. Clearly congestion reduction is important to air quality, and improvements to mass transit are crucial. However, if policy priorities were to target the major source of carbon emissions, the city would have to pay more attention to the energy efficiency of buildings than cars.

Conclusions

In the end, PlaNYC teaches us the importance of regional planning and the need for changes in the local governance structure. In the absence of a larger regional entity able to bring about change, the city needs to have control over energy and the ports. PlaNYC offers important changes and for the first time places sustainability at the center of decision making in the city. However, it does little to engage the region in a meaningful dialogue about sustainability.

PlaNYC encourages new physical development to meet the needs of a growing population, but without the explicit goals of social inclusion and equitable development, the gap between rich and poor is likely to widen. And by encouraging development before adequately managing energy and infrastructure the plan that aims to be long-term is ultimately short-sighted.

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