

Planning for All New Yorkers: A 21st Century Upgrade for New York's Planning Process

*Recommendations of the Community-Based Planning Task Force
Prepared by the Municipal Art Society Planning Center*



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I. Overview and Executive Summary



Source: Municipal Art Society Planning Center, 2008

In Brooklyn, a major redevelopment project languishes as opposition mounts and the housing market collapses. The opportunity to bring much-needed housing, jobs, open space, and streetscape to a long-neglected rail yard and urban renewal site in a neighborhood already undergoing its own renaissance needed little more than a push from government and a planning process that acknowledged the diverse stakeholders and allowed

for local voices to be involved from the beginning in the planning. But the plan was developed without an inclusive process or a role for broad community participation and approved without the vote of any local representative. Absent widespread local support, the project has stalled, leaving vacant lots and demolished buildings in its wake. This is not good planning.

In Manhattan, community residents in West Harlem spent years creating a vision for redevelopment that took into account local need, community character, local business opportunities, and a desire to rejuvenate without social displacement or new environmental burdens. Yet a



Source: Municipal Art Society Planning Center, 2008

competing vision brought forth by a local development interest ultimately prevailed, resulting in the loss of manufacturing, displacement of local residents, and, eventually, the expansion of a college campus into a once-cohesive neighborhood. This is not good planning.

In the Bronx, the Kingsbridge Armory—one of the nation’s largest armories—has been vacant for more than a decade. A private developer’s plan to re-use the sprawling complex—a publicly-owned asset—primarily as a regional big-box shopping hub, has met resistance from groups that have been advocating for years to balance the use of the

armory with the local need for schools, and living wage jobs. The fight over redevelopment has resulted in community conflicts and the City Council's rejection of the project.

This is not good planning.

We need to reform the way the government plans our communities.

This means strengthening both top-down and bottom-up planning. At this point, the weakest part is bottom-up planning. Time and again, communities feel left out of the process entirely, or feel that their participation ended up making little difference in the long run. Both the city and communities become consumed by rezonings—many of them contentious—that do not emanate from real planning and do not address the multiplicity of local or citywide needs and problems. Communities get frustrated. Development gets delayed. Land use decisions wind up being made in the courts. Faith in government erodes.

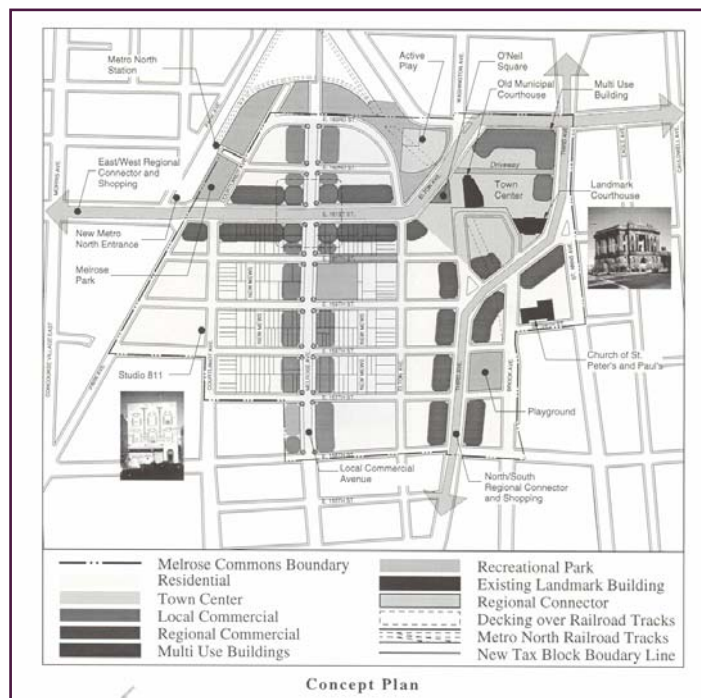
It doesn't have to be this way.

Current and historic examples of planning partnerships between government and community in New York City demonstrate that good planning can balance local and citywide need—through a planning process that includes and respects community voice. In the Bronx, in Melrose, for example, a community-initiated urban renewal plan has resulted in the construction of more than 1000 residential units that are affordable to current residents and over 50,000 square feet of commercial space that provides opportunity for local business in attractive, sustainable, mixed-use buildings. The Organization of Waterfront Neighborhoods, a group of communities overburdened by the siting of noxious uses and made ill by vehicle exhaust, banded together and convinced the city of a better way to manage solid waste removal and to phase out inland, truck-based waste facilities.

Planning works for everyone when the whole community is involved. Good planning flows from a good process.

There are, in fact, more than 80 community-initiated plans throughout the city that could easily become the basis for achievable neighborhood development—if only there was a commitment from government to plan implementation.

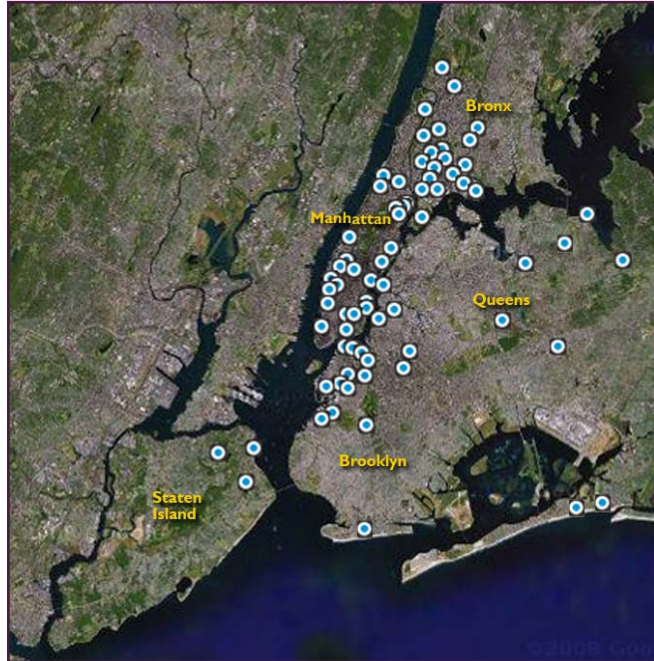
(To view these plans, visit <http://mas.org/planningcenter/atlas/>.)



Source: Nos Quedamos/We Stay, 1994

The city has a unique opportunity to adopt a new approach to planning that recognizes and values the ideas and contributions of ALL communities and ALL New Yorkers. Working together, we can create the city we all want. Other cities have taken the lead by giving communities the resources to plan, by linking community plans to city and regional plans, and by committing to the implementation of community plans—New York needs to rise to the challenge.

This report spells out what we must do to bring our city’s planning process into the 21st century. It is based on the legislative



Source: Municipal Art Society Planning Center, 2008

recommendations of the Community-Based Planning Task Force, a coalition whose work since 2001 has been coordinated and administered by the Municipal Art Society Planning Center. The Task Force is made up of community-based organizations, community boards, professional planners, environmental justice advocates, elected officials, and academics—groups and individuals who are actively involved in neighborhood planning and decision-making. The Task Force is working to secure a more meaningful role for New Yorkers in the city’s land use process, and to establish community-based planning as official NYC policy. *(See Appendix for a full list of Task Force members.)*

Here are the key challenges we address:

“A question of balance”

New York City’s growth and development must be balanced with neighborhood need. Too often, people who live and work here are at odds with developers who take a “whatever the market will bear” approach to development, often with the blessings of mayoral administrations that are focused on growth and dependent on real estate revenue.

“It’s time to catch up with other cities.”

Cities across the nation and the world as different from each other as Seattle, Washington and Porto Allegro, Brazil have embraced community-based planning as the way to do business. Developers, planners, designers, communities, and municipal agencies in these cities agree that although the process is never easy, a true commitment to a planning process that begins with local visions results in faster, less costly, more empowering, and more innovative planning and development.

“On paper, New York has strong support for community-based planning.”

The concept of community-based planning was at the heart of why New York City's community boards were created in the 1960s. But, four decades later, community boards and community-based organizations have few real opportunities to engage in proactive planning and even fewer opportunities to ensure that development suits neighborhood needs.

“We don’t have to reinvent the wheel.”

New York’s community boards are a place to begin rectifying the problems. Community boards have a City Charter-mandated responsibility to prepare plans for the growth, development and improvement of their districts—there is even a section of the Charter that spells out how neighborhoods can do planning—Section 197-a.

“Give communities the tools and resources to do their job.”

Community boards and community-based organizations often simply do not have the time, resources, or expertise to undertake the planning process, which can take years and hundreds of thousands of dollars. When sufficient resources are in place, however, community-led transformations follow.

“We have a golden opportunity to change the way decisions are made in our neighborhoods.”

Planning for All New Yorkers is a set of new legal recommendations that can change the way New York City does business and ensure that everyone has a seat at the decision-making table.

“The premise is that the people who live in a neighborhood or care personally about its destiny are in the best position to identify a neighborhood’s needs and plan for its future.”

*Charles Graves III
Director, Baltimore City
Planning Department*



Here are the key steps needed to reform our planning process:

Create a citywide planning framework, which spells out growth targets and benchmarks while balancing citywide and local need.

New York City currently lacks a comprehensive planning framework. Therefore, community plans may conflict with one another, and fair and equitable distribution of development, preservation, and noxious uses is not guaranteed. We lack ways to evaluate how large-scale development proposals, those conceived by both the private market and city agencies, compare to publicly-adopted planning and development goals.

We need a citywide planning framework based on:

- City goals;
- Council-approved city policies; and
- Approved community plans.

Provide communities with planning expertise.

Community boards generally consist of 50 unsalaried volunteers, a district manager, and sometimes a small support staff. While boards do a lot to cope with under funding and an unfunded mandate to plan, there is currently no guarantee that boards have the technical expertise and/or the resources necessary to undertake comprehensive neighborhood planning.

- Community boards need planning expertise on staff; and
- The Department of City Planning needs to be organized to facilitate provision of maps, data, and timely information to community boards.

Ensure that community plans reflect diverse community interests.

Before community boards are given more power to plan, there needs to be a commitment to the notion that the plans they create represent the interests of the diverse population of each district. Diverse representation on community boards can be ensured through:

- Active recruitment of new members to reflect the make-up of the district;
- An independent advisory panel for each borough to screen applicants according to transparent criteria; and
- An opportunity for boards to add extra members if warranted.

Ensure that there is real commitment to plan implementation.

Without support and implementation for community-based planning, the process is perceived as ineffective and inefficient. Community-based planning needs a more influential role in New York City's land use decision-making process. This can be achieved by:

- Requiring monitoring of all land use actions for compliance with adopted community plans;
- Using the city's official land use review process to hold government and developers accountable to adopted community plans;
- Requiring the Department of City Planning to act on land use recommendations contained in adopted community plans.

The preceding recommendations come from the input from dozens of groups and individuals who have been involved over the course of many years in one way or another with planning and decision-making at the grassroots level. Therefore, they reflect the experience of those who have been through the community planning process. They also reflect the dialogue that community groups, neighborhood advocates, and community boards have established—using the Campaign for Community-Based Planning as a forum—with academics, professional planners, good government groups, legal experts, elected officials, and even developers—who believe that reform of the planning process begins with a partnership between government and communities. The following report lays out in detail the arguments and the reasoning behind these recommendations.



Source: Municipal Art Society Planning Center, 2008



II. The Problem with the Process

a. How Community-Based Planning in New York City Currently Works

Livable neighborhoods make a city livable. Throughout the world there is increasing recognition of the importance of community-based planning in creating sustainable, healthy communities and cities that work—socially, culturally, and economically. Successful community-based planning is based on the visions and active participation of the people who live and work in a community. Effective community-based planning can uncover the special characteristics of a place; help the members of a community forge a sense of common purpose; identify opportunities for meaningful and realistic public and private investments; provide an important tool for accountability; and renew the belief of the public and government in the value of civic participation.

“Community-based plans represent and celebrate New York’s diversity. Yet, when put together they also present a compelling picture of common ideas, hopes, and dreams.”

*Eva Hanhardt
Director, Urban Environmental
Systems Management Program,
Pratt Graduate Center for the
Planning and the Environment*

New York City has experience with community-based planning, both informally through small-scale, local, consensus-based efforts and formally, through community board-sponsored 197-a plans. Now, in 2009, New York has had 20 years’ worth of experience with 197-a planning, following the pioneering revisions to the New York City Charter in 1989 that eased restrictions on community boards developing Section 197-a plans for the “development, growth, and improvement” of their neighborhoods. While there has been a significant proliferation in the number of all types of community-created plans (growing from under 40 in 2001 to more than 80 in 2009), 197-a plans remain the only community-based plans officially recognized by city

government. Their potential to open the decision-making process to the public is enormous, as is their potential to implement consensus-based community development goals and hold government accountable to publicly adopted policy.

But the potential of 197-a planning has also been severely undercut. The 1989 Charter revisions raised expectations that planning could result in substantive change at the neighborhood level, after many years of neglect of all but the most prosperous Manhattan neighborhoods. The positive transformations in Bronx Community District 3 (Morissania) and Manhattan Community District 4 (Hell’s Kitchen) that are directly linked to those communities’ 197-a plans affirm the potential of the process. However,

more recently-adopted 197-a plans, such as Manhattan Community District 9’s plan and Brooklyn Community Board 1’s two 197-a plans, have been no match for competing visions from private developers and have yet to result in the implementation of community development goals.

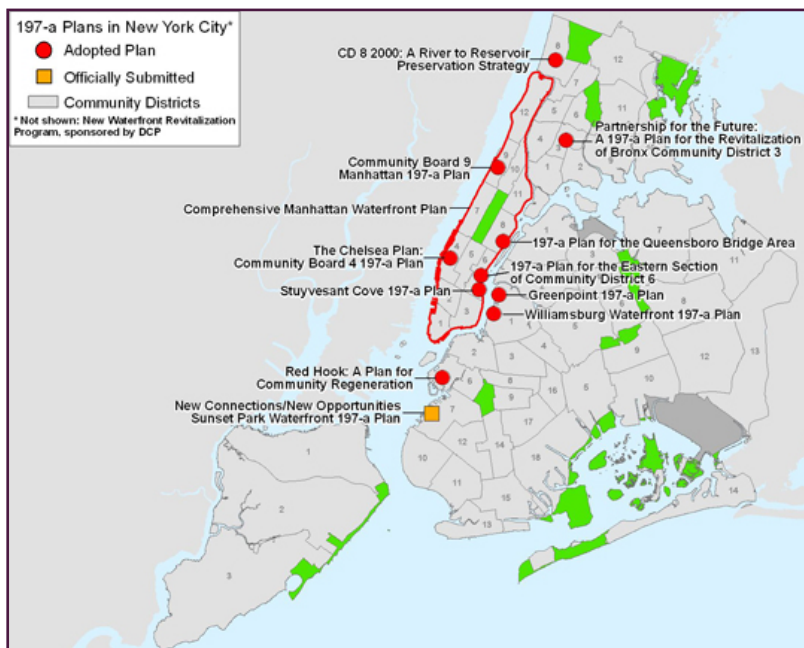
There are also positive impacts that the 197-a planning *process* engenders: the consensus-building required to adopt a 197-a plan can help galvanize communities with often very disparate constituencies; for instance, the 197-a planning process in Red Hook led to more inclusive community representation on Brooklyn Community Board 6 and positive community activism on a range of issues.

But there are significant problems surrounding the 197-a plan creation, review, and implementation process. Inclusivity in neighborhood planning is hampered by a general lack of awareness of community boards and community-based planning, as well as the lack of procedures or accountability standards to achieve appropriate representation on community boards. Effective community planning is made more difficult by the fact that there is no commitment of funds to communities for planning expertise, nor is there more than a few hours worth of training for community board members to prepare them for a proactive role in planning. Once plans are

“...it is really in the chorus of all those stakeholders at the table that the best vision, the best ideas, the best plans become materialized.”

Elizabeth Yeampierre
Executive Director, UPROSE,
winner of the 2007 Yolanda Garcia Community Planner Award

completed and have gone through the rigorous and extensive public review process and are adopted as city policy, there is no guarantee that plan recommendations will be implemented or will even have a measurable impact on local budget, service delivery, and development priorities. *(See Appendix for a chart of the 197-a adoption process.)*



Source: NYC Department of City Planning website, last accessed 12/2009

Before we give up on 197-a planning



altogether, we need to examine how the process can be used to it fullest. While 197-a plans have significant potential to provide standards for municipal accountability, whether on the part of city agencies or elected officials, that potential is not being used because 197-a plans are not directly and automatically linked to budgetary, service, and land use decisions.

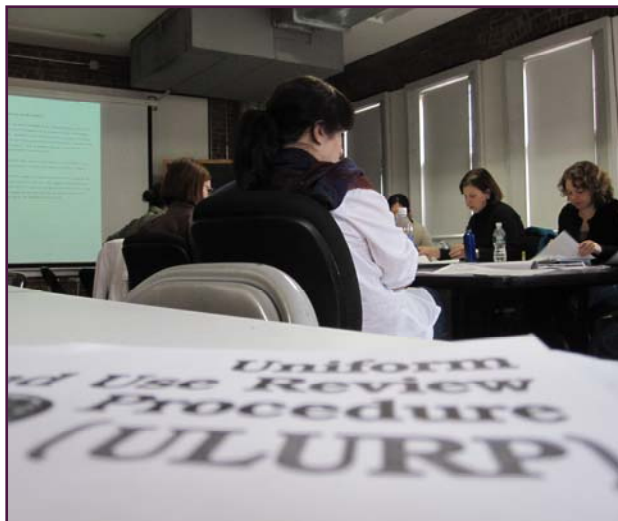
b. Task Force Findings on Community-Based Planning in New York City

In 2004, the Municipal Art Society and the Task Force hosted *Community-Based Planning in New York City: Summit 2004*. Over 100 planners, advocates, city agency employees, and academics took part in discussions on how to move toward formalizing community-based planning as citywide policy. The conclusions, fully documented in the 2005 report *Livable Neighborhoods for a Livable City: Policy Recommendations to Strengthen Community-Based Planning in New York City*, are as relevant now as they were then. An examination of the city’s current planning process and its flaws are summarized below.

Most New Yorkers don’t know about opportunities to participate in local decisions.

As presently configured, community boards are the grassroots level of government and the gateway for the officially recognized community-based planning process through their role in the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure and the 197-a process. As part of the city’s planning infrastructure, community boards bear much responsibility for their districts’ interests. Effective consensus-driven planning depends on the boards’ representing of the district and their ability to partner effectively with local community-based organizations.

Yet the percentage of New Yorkers who do not know that community boards exist is probably greater than the percentage of those who do. Some people avoid community boards until such time as the board takes a stance that is perceived as contrary to neighborhood interests. Others may feel that the board will not embrace their interests or that boards wield no true power in the political process. As a consequence, participation in



Source: Municipal Art Society Planning Center, 2009

development decisions and official planning efforts is rarely what it could be. Few people know that committee and board meetings are open to the public or that non-board members can serve on board committees. There is also the perception that community boards are not open to new immigrants and that membership requires close political connections. The means by which people discover community boards are few. There is no citywide systematized, ongoing outreach campaign sponsored by the city. Public schools rarely make civic engagement or awareness of the local political process part of the curriculum. There are no citywide public service announcements encouraging application for membership.



Source: Municipal Art Society Planning Center, 2009

New York has not ensured that everyone has equal opportunity to participate in local decisions.

Despite the amazing diversity of New York’s population (an estimated 170 different languages are spoken here), there are no citywide procedures or accountability

standards to ensure full neighborhood representation on community boards. Demographic and other types of information about board members are not gathered in any systematized fashion that would allow for analysis of which groups are represented and which are not. Each borough president is charged with ensuring that community board composition adequately represents different areas and groups in each community district, yet there are no standardized procedures for doing so.

“If the planning process is to encourage democratic urban government then it must operate so as to include rather than exclude citizens from participating in the process.”

*Paul Davidoff
Advocacy and Pluralism in
Planning, AIP Journal,
November 1965*

Accurate and up-to-date information on neighborhood demographics is critical for evaluating effective representation, targeting outreach and determining a balanced board membership. Each community district may contain several smaller “communities” or “neighborhoods,” each with unique needs,



skills, resources and demographics. Even though over one-third of New York City’s population is foreign-born, we have not yet crafted the means to engage the newest New Yorkers in planning decisions. There is no systematized outreach to youth—in fact, budget cuts under the last administration eliminated the youth coordinators who had served this function. Each of the five boroughs of New York City has a different application form for new potential community board members and no city agency is responsible for making sure that the pool of applicants is sufficiently diverse.

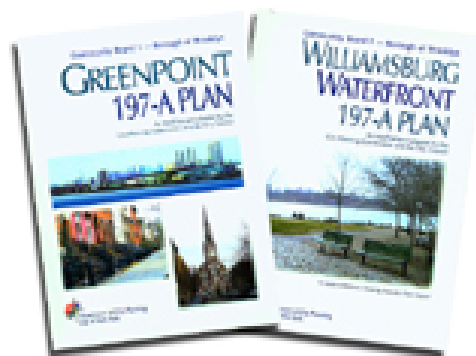
Open and transparent governance and planning efforts can bring disparate neighborhood groups together to hash out differences and to understand common interests and goals. Consensus-oriented planning is a way to increase public knowledge and awareness and to foster an understanding of democratic processes.

Community boards and community-based organizations need more training and technical resources to take on a proactive planning role.

The average community district has a population of over 135,000, which makes it comparable in size to Elizabeth, New Jersey and Albany, New York. All Charter responsibilities of the board (land use and zoning matters, the City budget, municipal service delivery, and other matters relating to their communities' welfare) are carried out by a very small staff typically consisting of the district manager and one or two administrative assistants. Any extra personnel, such as planning expertise, must be paid from funds raised beyond the board’s approximately \$200,000 budget (\$206,895 for fiscal year 2010)—which also pays for all salaries, office supplies and equipment, service contracts, printing, and mailing. In comparison, the City of Albany's Division of Planning has an annual budget of \$369,996 and employs six full-time staff.

In addition to their land use and service delivery roles, Charter changes made in 1989 gave boards the explicit right to develop 197-a plans and the right to obtain professional planning expertise.

Community board members themselves contribute a variety of skills to planning efforts, but these skills vary from board to board. While the Charter authorizes community boards to hire planners, the city has never appropriated funds for community planners and no community board currently employs a full-time planner.



Source: NYC Department of City Planning, 2002

As it now stands, standard training for community board members is just a few hours for their entire tenure. The Mayor’s Community Assistance Unit, in partnership with borough presidents’ offices, provides handbooks and minimal training for board members when they are first appointed. As a result, board members are sometimes

unclear about their duties and responsibilities and over-rely on district office staff. There is no refresher training, and there is, to date, no training in technology or communications. Community boards can request training on an ad hoc basis from the Department of City Planning, the Independent Budget Office, or borough presidents' offices, which in many cases do their best to provide some level of support, but this training is not standardized, required, nor considered to be an explicit obligation. (A noteworthy exception is current Manhattan Borough President Stringer, whose office provides several hours of additional training to board members on budget, land use, conflict of interest, and service delivery issues. Also notable is the borough's Urban Fellows Program, which places graduate planning students in paid internships at community boards.) Non-profit organizations, graduate urban planning programs, and for-profit planning firms occasionally provide pro bono assistance, support or training (such as the Municipal Art Society's Livable Neighborhoods Program and CITI Youth Program), yet this help is never guaranteed and is again, dependent on private funding.

The lack of training of both community board members and district office staff is a major obstacle to participation. Staff are consequently constrained in their effectiveness and the perception of the board's ability, both by insiders and outsiders, is diminished. The pace at which the board can process budget, planning, and development decisions is slowed. There is little guidance available on managing a community board office, nor are there standard benchmarks for board performance.

Inadequate resources for plan creation and inadequate implementation mechanisms undermine 197-a effectiveness.

There are 59 community boards in New York City. Despite the 1989 Charter provisions for 197-a planning, only thirteen plans sponsored by community boards have been officially submitted to the city. Of these, only ten have been adopted by the City Council (one is pending review; two others were withdrawn or disapproved). *(See the Appendix for a full list of 197-a plans.)* The obstacles to 197-a planning are many: training, funding, investment of time, lengthy city approval process, uncertain outcome, etc. Those engaged in 197-a planning often have high expectations for outcomes that are rarely met, while other people avoid getting involved because they feel the plan will have no impact or because they feel they do not have sufficient time or skills.

Plan preparation requires maps, data, planning expertise, outreach, and, in some cases, community organizing. Currently there is no systematic way or centralized clearinghouse from which communities can identify and obtain such resources. 197-a plans can cost between \$50,000 and \$250,000 just to create, depending on the size of the area and the scope of the plan. Yet there is no collective pool or even reliable source of funding for community-based planning. Sometimes partial funding can be obtained from the local city council member or the borough president; other times from private foundations or grants, all of which require time and a bit of political skill or savvy to obtain. Community boards have the additional burden of having to arrange for a fiscal conduit to receive direct funding from non-city sources.



(Not all planning goals require the creation of a full 197-a plan. Smaller community-based plans, focused on a specific issue or a smaller geographic area, can result in more immediate action, and also could form the basis of future plans and guide future decisions by the board. Less time-consuming and less costly, these smaller plans can convey a community's ideas more quickly. While not a substitute for a community plan, the Department of City Planning frequently undertakes rezoning studies and sponsors 197-c (rezoning) applications in collaboration with affected community organizations.)

III. Nationwide Trends in Community-Based Planning

While New York has struggled to make 197-a planning effective, other cities in the United States have surged forward in their efforts to engage people in developing comprehensive neighborhood plans. The experience of these cities as well as a growing number of independent community-based planning initiatives around the country can provide valuable lessons for New York City.

Community-based planning has grown in prominence in the United States and abroad, providing alternatives to traditional top-down or development controlled planning and decision-making and emphasizing comprehensive, multi-sectoral approaches to complex and persistent urban problems. This has led to a proliferation of community-based planning initiatives in cities and towns across the country. State and federal agencies are also turning to a community-based planning model to carry out programs successfully at the local level. For instance, the New York State Brownfield Opportunity Area Program (BOAP), devoted to clean-up and re-use of contaminated sites often found in low-income neighborhoods, uses a three-phase approach that sets aside funds to support community visioning for re-use at the outset of the process, and subsequent funding and tax credits for development projects that are built according to the local plan. The federal Environmental Protection Agency's Community Action for a Renewed Environment (CARE) program provides grants to local groups for tools, technical support, and funding to assess local pollution risks and to set priorities for risk-reduction through a community-based plan.

Other cities, such as London, Portland, and Boston are working with residents on plans to address climate change through setting local sustainability agendas and working with the public to help measure progress toward successful implementation. These initiatives are diverse and tailored to local conditions, but what they have in common is a commitment to broad community participation, developing collaborative partnerships, and strengthening local capacities.

A number of cities, including those referenced below, have embraced community-based planning as a model for coordinating planning, funding, and service delivery, institutionalizing the practice in their local laws and ordinances. New regulations direct city planning and community development agencies in these cities to enter into partnership with communities, or provide assistance to communities, in developing and implementing comprehensive neighborhood plans.

While municipal planning processes differ from region to region and evolve from each city's unique experiences and history with public participation, there are features that emerge as common watermarks of a fully participatory planning process. There is a commitment to inclusiveness, development of collaborative partnerships, and strengthening of local capacities. Each city has a unique process but there are underlying similarities:

- a link between neighborhood plans and a comprehensive city plan;
- explicit support from and partnership with city government;



- a clearly defined planning process;
- benchmarks and predictability of outcome; and,
- commitment to implementation.

New York City in Comparison

While New York fares reasonably well in comparison to other cities with regard to a clearly defined planning process (the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure provides a framework and a schedule for making land use decisions) and with respect to support and partnership with government (the Department of City Planning has historically provided substantial support to communities upon request—at the borough offices for rezonings and at the central office through the Planning Coordination unit.), other cities have surged ahead in updating their planning processes for the 21st century.

Seattle, Minneapolis, Buffalo, Portland, Houston, and Rochester take the lead when it comes to informing communities about exactly what to expect before, during, and after the planning process and to providing assurance that once communities take on the difficult task of planning, their efforts will have meaning because there is a budget for implementation in place. Unlike any other city that has committed to community-based planning by adopting legislation to make it official policy, New York does not have an officially-adopted comprehensive citywide plan. Additionally, other cities (Seattle, Minneapolis, Buffalo, Portland, and Rochester) have seized on the opportunity of comprehensive planning as a means of building up from neighborhood-based plans and of adopting a needs-based approach to comprehensive planning.

The net result of planning process reform in these cities has been the creation of more neighborhood plans, the implementation of more consensus-based planning recommendations, more ability to leverage private funds to implement public development goals that are broadly supported, and greater transparency and accountability in decisions made about development and public services.

(See Appendix for more information on each of the cities mentioned here.)

Community-Based Planning: National Comparison

| | Benchmarks and Predictability of Outcome | Commitment to Implementation | Neighborhood Plans Linked to Comprehensive Plan | Comprehensive Citywide Plan | Clearly Defined Planning Process | Support From and Partnership with Government |
|----------------|--|------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| Seattle WA | √+ | √+ | √+ | √+ | √+ | √+ |
| Minneapolis MN | √+ | √+ | √+ | √+ | √+ | √+ |
| Buffalo NY | √+ | √+ | √+ | √+ | √+ | √+ |
| Portland OR | √+ | √+ | √+ | √+ | √+ | √+ |
| Houston TX | √+ | √ | Insufficient Data | √+ | √+ | √+ |
| Rochester NY | √+ | √ | √+ | √+ | √+ | √+ |
| Baltimore MD | Insufficient Data | √ | √+ | √+ | √+ | √+ |
| New York NY | x | x | x | x | √ | √ |

Source: Municipal Art Society Planning Center, 2009

New York City is arguably far more complex in its political organization and diverse in its neighborhoods than other U.S. cities, which may make the creation of a new planning framework more of an undertaking. But it is precisely for these reasons that a decentralized, predictable, and transparent planning process is in order. A new planning framework must also be able to accommodate calls for changes to city policy—addressing critical and growing needs for affordable housing, job creation, open space, and sustainability. A city as large and as enmeshed in the global economy as New York needs to have in place secure mechanisms to balance citywide needs with neighborhood needs—a process to create agreed-upon planning and development goals can achieve that.

IV. Task Force Recommendations

Reform of the planning process requires a broad look at practices, capacity, commitment, and inclusivity. Each operating agency in New York City must be empowered to view communities as partners, not as adversaries. A faltering market means that only the most broadly-supported plans and proposals are adopted and built.



Source: Municipal Art Society Planning Center, 2004

The Task Force bases its recommendations on 1) direct experience working to incorporate community plans into the city's planning process; 2) years of discussion with neighborhood advocates, planners, city agency staff, developers, lawyers, community boards, and elected officials; and 3) an examination of cross-national models for community-based planning. While changing the culture of city agencies and empowering staff to partner with communities is always crucial to reform efforts, and while pointing to best practices may inspire improvements to the planning process in piecemeal fashion, the Task Force recommends that the City begin a dialogue on a more comprehensive approach to changing the way we plan for New York.

The Task Force envisions a series of changes to the New York City administrative code and City Charter based on four goals:

Link neighborhood plans to a comprehensive citywide planning framework.

Legislation should require a comprehensive citywide planning framework for neighborhood plans, establishing city's goals, growth targets, needs, benchmarks. Existing 197-a plans can be the building blocks for the framework, and the framework, in turn, can provide a guide for the creation of subsequent 197-a plans. Land use decisions should be required to conform to the citywide planning framework.

Empower communities with their own planning expertise and create organizational capacity within city government to manage new planning responsibilities.

Legislation should create a new office within the Department of City Planning that provides planning and organizing assistance as well as implementation oversight. Community boards should be provided with funding sufficient to hire district planners,

who are hired and tasked by community boards but who work closely with the Department of City Planning on behalf of their districts.

Commit to implementing 197-a plan recommendations.

Legislation should require that city land use decisions conform to 197-a plans and that adoption of a 197-a plan trigger immediate action by the Department of City Planning.

Ensure that 197-a plans truly reflect diverse community interests.

Legislation should require that those serving on community boards are drawn from all quarters of the district's population and go through an appointment process that is free of undue political influence.

Steps to Ensure that Planning Works for All New Yorkers

The legislative goals explained above can be further broken down into legislative measures to be taken up by the City Council and the next Charter Revision Commission, in dialogue with community boards, community-based organizations and neighborhood advocates, the professional planning and development community, and the general public.

1. Create a citywide planning framework that spells out growth targets and benchmarks.

While the creation of a citywide plan to organize all land use throughout the five boroughs is not a realistic goal, establishing a basic blueprint to explain citywide goals for growth, development, preservation, housing, infrastructure, sustainability, and fair share is easily within our grasp. But New York City currently lacks a comprehensive planning framework. Therefore, community plans may conflict with one another, and fair and equitable distribution of development, preservation, and noxious uses is not guaranteed. Without a planning framework that has been subjected to the public approval process, there is no meaningful way to ensure that the decisions made about development are transparent and rooted in public policy.



With a planning framework in place, for example, zoning can be linked more directly and clearly to planning; and economic development proposals can be more directly connected to economic development goals, with better transparency. With a planning framework in place, New York's diverse communities will have a better understanding of how to accept their fair share of burdens and benefits that must be distributed equally around the city.



A framework would allow elected officials and the public an automatic way to assess whether private, state, and federal proposals are consonant with city policy.

The framework needs to include an assessment of the existing conditions, problems and needs of the city and of each community district; projections of future conditions, problems and needs of the city and of each community district; goals and strategies to address problems and needs of the city and each community district therein; an assessment of the long-range impacts of such goals and strategies including, but not limited to, the impacts on future growth and development opportunities, the impacts on the public health, safety, and welfare of people, economic and housing opportunities, the physical environment and the distribution of city facilities; and a projection of the capital and other budgetary needs necessary to implement the proposed plan or amendments.

A citywide planning framework needs to result from a participatory process. New York’s Uniform Land Use Review Procedure offers a model and a way to organize public input and secure broad buy-in through dialogue with elected representatives at the local, borough, and citywide levels. The public approval process also allows transparency—another check to ensure that the framework reflects all required elements.

The City Planning Commission should be tasked with creating a comprehensive citywide planning framework based on:

- City goals
- Council-approved city policies
- Approved 197-a plans.



Source: NYC Mayors Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability, 2007

The comprehensive planning framework should:

- Assess current and future needs of the City and of each community district.
- Be created with widely-publicized public hearings in each borough.
- Require City Planning to make written consistency findings when certifying 197-c applications.
- Have required consideration in the City’s ten-year capital strategy.

2. Provide Planning Support to Community Boards

Community boards generally consist of 50 unsalaried volunteers, a District Manager, and a small support staff. There is currently no guarantee that boards have the technical expertise and/or the resources necessary to undertake comprehensive planning, despite the fact that community boards bear this responsibility under the provisions of the City Charter. While the Department of City Planning and the land use departments of borough



Source: Municipal Art Society Planning Center, 2009

presidents certainly provide assistance to communities and community boards upon request, community boards have no ability to independently direct the use of planning expertise, to, for example, evaluate a controversial development proposal in light of the community board's stated planning principles. (New York State, in devising a process for communities to respond to proposals to site power plants [Article X], has acknowledged the need for communities to have equal access to information and expertise to make informed evaluations about siting decisions, and creates a fund from private applicants for communities to pay for consultants.)

Planners who work for communities should work in those communities, ideally at the office of the community board in question. Yet support at the central office of City Planning should be built in systemically, in order that planners all have equal ability to avail themselves of technical resources, data, and services needed to perform their tasks.

Community boards should have budgets sufficient and be required to hire District Planners. An Office of Community Planning within the Department of City Planning should provide direct support to District Planners.

The District Planner should:

- Be hired, fired and tasked directly by the community board.
- Assist the board with: preparing comprehensive neighborhood plans, preparing and reviewing land use actions, preparing District Needs Statements, and reviewing land use actions for compliance with adopted plans, among other necessary planning-related work.

The Office of Community Planning should:

- Provide to each community board technical data, staff assistance and other services necessary to allow boards to develop plans for the development, growth, preservation and improvement of community districts.



- Provide technical data to help community boards assess and project existing conditions, problems and needs within the community district and develop planning goals and strategies.
- Help boards address the impacts on future growth and development opportunities, the impacts on general health, safety, and welfare of people, economic and housing opportunities, the physical environment and the distribution of city facilities.
- Determine whether goals and strategies are within the legal authority of the city to undertake and consult with relevant city and state agencies about issues that fall within the jurisdiction of city agencies, including identifying the relevant agencies and facilitating such consultation.
- Determine the capital and other budgetary impacts and needs necessary to fully implement proposed plans; assess the relationships of proposed plans to other applicable city policies; assure public participation in the formulation and development of proposed plans by facilitating opportunities for such public participation, including workshops, hearings and/or technical advisory committees; and prepare proposed plans for submission to the city planning commission for review.
- Create detailed population profiles for each community district.
- Have an 11-member advisory board, which will hold a public hearing each year on the operation and performance of the Office of Community Planning.

3. Ensure Diverse Representation on Community Boards



Source: Municipal Art Society Planning Center, 2004

Community boards, as pointed out above, struggle to perform their charter-mandated duties on a shoestring budget with a skeleton staff and an all-volunteer membership. Yet it is a reality that community boards are the frequent target of criticism. Accusations that boards are sometimes parochial and reflect only a narrow range of interests are common; as are accusations that board appointments

are handed out as political favors. Conflict of interest complaints also frequently mar the idea of community boards acting in service of a larger public good. One solution would be to hold community board general elections, as is done for parallel entities in Houston, Texas; however, launching and funding political campaigns can be a full-time job and

may pose too great an obstacle for those who have great passion for the neighborhood but fewer resources. There are other options (see below) for tackling the patronage criticism.

Another complaint is that boards are obstructionist, tending to reject rather than reshape development proposals. And finally, the criticism that community boards are not sufficiently representative has undermined their legitimacy and ability to make the claim that their decisions are an accurate reflection of the will of the people in that district.

Before we give community boards more power to plan, we need to make sure that the plans boards create represent the interests of the diverse population of each district. There are less imposing alternatives than quota systems available to create the most representative boards possible—increasing the pool of applicants through targeted outreach efforts linked to up-to-the-minute data portraits of each district turns the appointment process into a year-round, proactive effort that is linked with the daily operations of borough presidents' offices, as opposed to a once-a-year ritual, separate and apart from a fuller community development process.

The City needs to:

- Establish an Independent Community Board Advisory Panel for each borough to assist in screening community board applicants according to standardized and publicized criteria.
- Require each borough president to annually document and report upon the current composition of each community board in the borough, using the categories specified in the community composite profiles created by the Office of Community Planning.
- Require each borough president to address inconsistencies between community district composite profiles and community board membership by a creating targeted outreach plan for each community district.
- Require that the Public Advocate review consistency of borough president outreach plans with the community district composite profiles.
- Link the number of community board members to district population (one additional per 5000 above city average, currently 135,000).
- Increase terms to four years; limited to three terms; allow members to reapply after a two-year absence.

4. Strengthen the Role of Community-Based Planning

Plans are created by assessing current conditions and needs and then projecting forward. It is a process of matching vision with educated guesses about what will take place in the future. Sometimes variables shift according to forces outside of municipal control (i.e., the state of the global economy; federal immigration policy; and housing subsidies). While it may not be prudent to legally require the implementation of plans knowing that the variables that underpin them may shift or change, it is equally imprudent to spend resources and energy in the creation of plans that have no secure connections to the city's land use process, budget, or citywide land use policy.



The fact that 197-a plans are merely advisory means that they can be easily ignored or overridden. The fact that they are not automatically linked to district needs and budgets means that communities must spend nearly as much time and energy in watch-dogging to ensure compliance with 197-a plans as they did in the creation of 197-a plans.

Without support and implementation for community planning, the process is perceived as ineffective and inefficient; communities get frustrated; development is delayed; and faith in government erodes. The City must require a broad role for 197-a plans in the land use review process that reinforces their standing as city policy and ensures that those components of 197-a plans that are within the power of the Department of City Planning to implement are done so expeditiously.

To strengthen 197-a plans, the City must ensure that:

- Any land use action that deviates from an adopted 197-a plan trigger additional scrutiny in the review process.
- The Office of Community Planning monitor all land use actions for compliance with adopted 197-a plans.
- The Department of City Planning, within 90 days of adoption, determines which 197-a plan recommendations are appropriate for ULURP.
- Once determined, the Department of City Planning should file an appropriate ULURP application within 30 days.

V. Additional Challenges

Linking plans to the budget would result in greater accountability and transparency. There is currently not a strong linkage between 197-a plans and the actions of any city agencies other than the City Planning Commission. Neither the Charter nor the subsequent rules promulgated by the City Planning Commission connect 197-a plans to Section 2505 district service cabinet functions and Section 2707 agency budget and service statements. Coordinating these aspects may not have been anticipated during 1989 Charter revision, but as 197-a planning and community planning generally have evolved, the need to connect place-based planning with service agency planning has grown more and more apparent. 197-a plans provide an important opportunity for integrating the services and projects of different city agencies at the community district level. They deal with issues that cross agency lines and provide the strategic planning framework to develop coordinated Section 2707 agency budget and service statements.

The recommendations laid out here in relation to strengthening 197-a planning address only the actions of the Department of City Planning, yet 197-a plans, because of their comprehensive nature, address the functions of many of the city's operations agencies—the Department of Transportation; the Department of Parks and Recreation; the Department of Sanitation; and Housing Preservation and Development to name just a few of the more obvious. Similar legislative measures need to be crafted to address how to reconcile the operations of these agencies with 197-a recommendations.

While there are clear advantages to having a more transparent, representative, and accountable planning process, there are also some real costs attached to achieving reform. Most of the hard costs of these recommendations come in relation to increasing the budgets of community boards to hire planners. The cost for adding 59 planners to the city's payroll is minimal; however, in relation to the overall city budget (\$50,000 each for a total of \$2,950,000) yet the improvements to decision-making and improved community board performance would be enormous. Small increases in fees for ULURP and building permits could provide a revenue source.



VI. Current Opportunities for Reform

An initial legal analysis of the recommendations spelled out here determined that it is within the grasp of City Council to make these changes to the city charter and administrative code without going through the process of amending the charter via referendum.

Yet the Charter Revision Commission rumored to be assembled in early 2010 to review and make recommendations on the operations of city government presents an opportunity to insert reforms to the city's planning process. Once the members and mandate of the commission are made public, the process of getting "Planning for All New Yorkers" onto the agenda can begin.

Now is the time to set the Department of City Planning and the City Planning Commission in motion on the creation of a comprehensive planning framework that builds off of the goals and objectives in PlaNYC2030 yet goes further to create a dialogue between the City of New York and its diverse neighborhoods.

VII. Appendices

Appendix A: Task Force Members

COMMUNITY BOARDS

Bronx Community Board 2
Bronx Community Board 5
Bronx Community Board 6
Brooklyn Community Board 2 *
Brooklyn Community Board 3
Brooklyn Community Board 7
Brooklyn Community Board 9
Manhattan Community Board 1
Manhattan Community Board 2
Manhattan Community Board 3 *
Manhattan Community Board 6
Manhattan Community Board 12
Queens Community Board 3

ELECTED OFFICIALS

Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer
Council Member Maria del Carmen Arroyo
Council Member Gale Brewer
Council Member Helen Foster
Council Member Robert Jackson
Council Member Letitia James
Council Member John C. Liu
Council Member Melissa Mark-Viverito
Council Member Miguel Martinez
Council Member Rosie Mendez
Council Member David Yassky

ORGANIZATIONS

Center for an Urban Future
Citizens Committee for NYC
Citizens Union
City College Architectural Center
City Lore / Place Matters
Coalition to Preserve Community
Connecting.nyc Inc.
Council of Brooklyn Neighborhoods
Develop, Don't Destroy Brooklyn
East Midtown Coalition for Sensible Development
East Harlem Preservation
Families United for Racial & Economic Equality (FUREE)
Fifth Avenue Committee
Four Borough Neighborhood Preservation Alliance
Friends of the High Line
Greenpoint Waterfront Assn. for Parks & Planning (GWAPP)
Halcrow
Hell's Kitchen Neighborhood Association
Historic Districts Council
Kingsbridge Heights Neighborhood Improvement Assoc.
Lower East Side Ecology Center
M&R Strategic Services
The Municipal Art Society *

Myrtle Avenue Brooklyn Partnerships *
Neighbors Allied for Good Growth (NAG) *
New York Lawyers for the Public Interest
New Yorkers for Parks
New York Professional Nurses Union
The North Shore Waterfront Greenbelt *
The NYC Environmental Justice Alliance
New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG)
Organization of Waterfront Neighborhoods
Picture the Homeless
Planners Network *
The Point Community Development Corporation
Pratt Center for Community Development *
Project for Public Spaces
Queens Community House
Red Hook Civic Association *
Regional Plan Association
Rockaway Waterfront Alliance
South Asian Youth Action (SAYA!)
Southwest Brooklyn Industrial Development Corporation
Sustainable South Bronx (SSBX)
United Puerto Rican Organization of Sunset Park (UPROSE) *
Urban Agenda
VIP Community Services
We Stay/Nos Quedamos *
West Harlem Environmental Action (WeACT)
Westsiders for Public Participation
Youth Ministries for Peace & Justice

INDIVIDUALS

Annetta Seecharan
Arturo Sanchez
Brendan Sexton
Ethel Sheffer
Gregory Haley, AIA
Eva Handhardt *
Jane Churchman
Jocelyne Chait
Jonathan Martin
LaQuita Henry
Lee Norsworthy

Naomi Zauderer
Pat Jones
Ron Hayduk
Ron Shiffman, AICP

Stuart Pertz, FAIA *
Tim Tompkins
Thomas Kappner
Tom Lowenhaupt *
Timothy Logan
Toya Williford
Walter South

* Executive Committee Members



Campaign for Community-Based Planning Milestones

- 2001** • Planning for All New Yorkers: the Briefing Book of Community-Based Plans

- 2002** • Held Community-Based Planning Conference
 - Published *The Livable City: Community-Based Planning*

- 2004** • Received endorsement of ten community boards
 - Held Community-Based Planning Summit – Over 100 participants
 - Successfully prompted the City Council to hold oversight hearings on future of community boards

- 2005** • Formed Executive Committee
 - Published *Livable Neighborhoods for a Livable City: Policy Recommendations to Strengthen Community-Based Planning in New York City*
 - Upon request of Charter Revision Commission, submitted recommendations for changes to city Charter

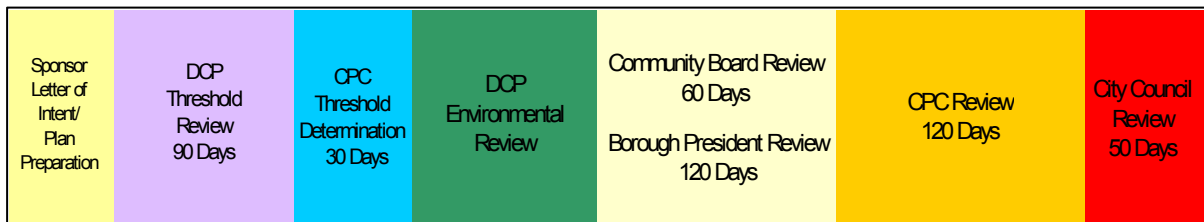
- 2007** • Launched www.communitybasedplanningnyc.org

CURRENT

The Community-Based Planning Task Force has drafted *Planning for All New Yorkers*, a reform framework for bring New York’s planning processes into the 21st century.

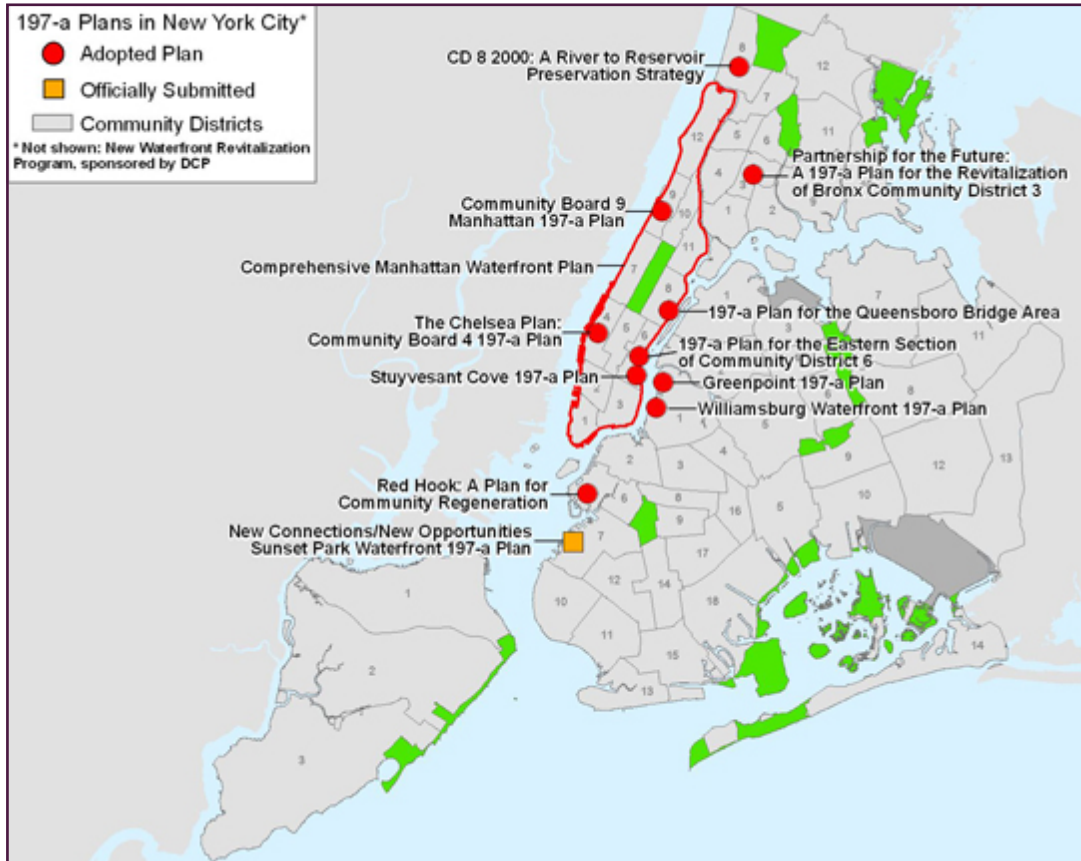
Appendix B: Steps in the 197-a Review Process

1. Letter of Intent/Plan Preparation
2. Plan Submission
3. Threshold Review
4. Threshold Determination
5. Environmental Review & Determination
6. Community/Borough Review
7. City Planning Commission Substantive Review
8. City Council Review
9. Distribution of Adopted Plan



Source: NYC Department of City Planning, last accessed 12/2009

Appendix C: Adopted 197-a Plans



Source: NYC Department of City Planning, last accessed 12/2009

Appendix D: Nationwide Planning Process Case Studies

Seattle, Washington

Since 1995, the Seattle Department of Neighborhoods (DON) has provided citywide coordination for the Neighborhood Planning Program. The program, which was created to provide technical assistance for communities to enable them to respond to the state's Growth Management Act, links community plans directly to funds through the Neighborhood Matching Fund and Neighborhood Budget Prioritization program. DON manages these programs through a citizen-led planning council. To date, 38 community-based plans have been created (in contrast to NYC's 10 adopted community-initiated 197-a plans). This planning framework, which set growth targets for Seattle neighborhoods, helped communities create plans that balance neighborhood, city, and regional needs. By having neighborhood-based plans directly linked to funding, neighborhoods were able to implement their plans and growth in Seattle has been adequately addressed. DON is currently in the process of helping communities update their plans to accommodate an additional 100,000 Seattle residents by the year 2024.

Minneapolis, Minnesota

The Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program (NRP) is an investment-based program that was established in 1990 to help Minnesota's residents create Neighborhood Based Action Plans. The NRP office provides technical assistance to groups creating community-based plans and funding to help implement them once they are approved by the Minneapolis Policy Board and city council. The NRP helps neighborhoods work in concert with government and private entities to create comprehensive plans that address everything from housing to safety to social services and transportation. NRP is a 20-year, \$20 million per year program. It is currently in Phase II with existing plans being updated. So far, 44 of the city's 72 plans have already been updated and over \$250 million dollars have been invested using Tax Increment Financing. The city of Minneapolis has a comprehensive plan and the neighborhoods plans are the foundation for the city's planning framework.

Rochester, New York

Initiated by Mayor Bill Johnson in the early 1990's, Neighbors Building Neighborhoods (NBN) is a program of the Rochester Department of Planning that provides technical assistance to communities to help them create plans. The city of Rochester was organized into 10 sectors and each sector was responsible for creating its own plan with technical assistance provided by the Department of Planning. The community then had to identify partners for implementing their plan as well as resources. Once these components were in place, a plan could move forward. As of 2006, at least 76 percent of each community-based plan had been implemented. These plans have been used to create the City of Rochester's comprehensive plan which will be updated in 2010 after the new census is released.

Baltimore, Maryland

The Neighborhood Planning Program, launched in 2000, was established to help neighborhoods identify long-term goals that could be addressed through short-term



implementation actions. The program is implemented through the Baltimore Department of Planning. To date, 23 community-based plans have been created and the city of Baltimore is continuing to improve the program by working particularly on ways to make it more inclusive. The City of Baltimore created the Strategic Neighborhood Action Plan (SCAN) neighborhoods as a pilot program for neighborhoods in Southwest Baltimore. The program places an emphasis on inclusion, participation, and having a planning process that addresses a wide array of issues.

Houston, Texas

The Houston Super Neighborhood program, which is run by the Houston Department of Planning and Development, helps Houston’s “Super Neighborhoods” create community action items through a community-based process. Communities can choose to opt-in to the Super Neighborhood program and receive designation through a clearly defined city process that includes adopting by-laws. The governing body of Super Neighborhoods is similar to that of a NYC community board; however the board members are elected. Once a Super Neighborhood creates a list of community action items; it can track these items online in a transparent format. Most community action items are capital-related; however there are some studies and operational actions that are requested by Super Neighborhoods as well. To strengthen their effectiveness and influence, Super Neighborhoods have created an independent alliance that meets regularly.

Buffalo, New York

Good Neighbors Planning Alliance (GNPA) is a neighborhood-based planning process initiated by the Buffalo Office of Strategic Planning, as part of the City of Buffalo’s ongoing comprehensive planning efforts. The GNPA helps communities build their capacity to plan and assist them as they create community-based plans. The city’s comprehensive plan is directly linked to the city’s capital improvement and program budget and the planning department reviews all development proposals to ensure their consistency with the city’s master plan.

Portland, Oregon

In 2005, Portland initiated Vision into Action (VIA), Portland’s vision for 2030. Portland’s VIA initiative is cited as the largest citywide vision process in Oregon and the nation, having had over 17,000 people take part in this citywide vision session. The VIA coalition is community-led, and their work was built upon Portland’s past community-based planning efforts including the Neighborhood Planning Program which was created to update Portland’s comprehensive plan in the early 1990’s. In 2007, VIA was completed and the VIA committee is currently giving competitive grants to complete work that advances the vision of the city.