



By Linda K. Breggin

And the Winner Is ... New York City

The Environmental Law Institute will give its annual award for achievement in environmental law, policy, and management to the City of New York for “its outstanding leadership in creating and implementing a preeminent sustainable development plan.”

Mayor Bloomberg, who will receive the award on the city’s behalf, introduced his far-reaching initiative, known as PlaNYC 2030, five years ago. It addresses key long-term challenges facing the city, including population growth, aging infrastructure, economic changes, and global warming. It is no surprise that the effort commonly is referred to using adjectives such as “unprecedented” and “path breaking.” Mayor Bloomberg himself set the bar high when he announced his objective to “create the first environmentally sustainable 21st century city.”

The centerpiece of PlaNYC is a set of ambitious goals for housing and neighborhoods, parks and public spaces, brownfields, waterways, water supply, transportation, energy, air quality, solid waste, and climate change. The goals vary in formulation but several are numeric, including reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 30 percent and diverting 75 percent of solid waste from landfills. These goals are complemented by 137 specific initiatives.

In 2011, the city reported that it

was on schedule to achieve most of its long term goals and had launched 97 percent of the initiatives in the plan. Among the specific accomplishments are making 87 percent of new development transit-accessible, bringing more than 250,000 additional New Yorkers within a 10-minute walk of a park, launching the city’s first bus rapid transit system, committing \$1.5 billion for green infrastructure to clean waterways, and planting approximately half a million trees.

The mayor’s initiative has received many accolades, but it is not without critics. Some have faulted the process used to develop the plan, including Hunter College professor Tom Angotti, who characterizes PlaNYC as “top-down,” and written primarily by a large consulting firm with minimal public input. Others take issue with implementation. For example, the *New York Post* recently reported on “downsized plans, engineering issues and delays” in connection with the regional parks addressed in the plan.

Whether or not these criticisms are valid, PlaNYC warrants recognition. First, it is easy to forget that the plan is the result of strong leadership. When it was first released, the *New York Times* pronounced that “Mr. Bloomberg’s plan is fraught with economic and political obstacles” and characterized key proposals as “high-stakes and controversial.” Environmental Defense Fund’s Andrew Darrell, a member of the advisory board that helped develop the plan, blogged at the time: “It’s rare to see a political leader step up in such a big way.” In a recent tweet, Mayor Bloomberg opined: “There’s something more important than getting elected & that’s standing up and saying what you think is right.” PlaNYC is the product of that belief.

Second, although it is not easy to develop an initiative with the breadth of PlaNYC, it is even harder to implement it. Yet the mayor has forged

ahead in the face of critics and setbacks, such as insurmountable resistance to his proposal to charge drivers fees for entering congested areas of the city and a global recession that reduced its capital budget. Despite these challenges, based on a year-long case study, ICLEI—Local Governments for Sustainability concludes that PlaNYC “is a success because it is not just a plan; it is an action-oriented agenda that provided the city with a framework for implementing bold changes.”

Among the key factors leading to the success of PlaNYC, according to ICLEI, are “strong mayoral leadership and cooperation between the Mayor’s Office and City Council,” “extensive coordination and collaboration between the agencies,” “central management and coordination,” an “external Sustainability Advisory Board,” a “comprehensive public outreach process,” and “an implementation plan with a timeline and a funded budget.”

Third, as the largest city in America, New York garners attention. It may not be the most sustainable U.S. city — Our Green Cities, for example, ranks it 14th. And to be sure, it is not Portland (which ranked first), but that is the point. New York is likely to have nine million residents by 2030, one million more than in 2005. The resource implications are daunting. As Natural Resources Defense Council’s Ashok Gupta explained to *Time* magazine in 2009, mimicking Frank Sinatra’s *New York, New York*, “If we can solve these challenges here, we can solve them anywhere.” And, according to ELI President John C. Cruden, that is why ELI picked the city of New York, because it “provides an example for cities and their leadership across America and the world.”

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