The New York Metro area revisits a traditional concept

By Corry Buckwalter Berkooz
Regional planning has ridden up and down a rollercoaster of popularity in the U.S. From those who led the way—Jane Jacobs, Lewis Mumford, Ian McHarg—to the present, planners have created a formula for livable communities in a regional context, with affordable housing, accessible public transportation, green spaces, and good jobs as part of the mix. Now regionalism is getting another chance through the HUD Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant Program, which has issued hundreds of grants to U.S. communities since 2009. The aim: to create and implement regional plans.
Regional planning has a rich history in the U.S., with federal programs such as the Tennessee Valley Authority and through civic organizations such as Envision Utah, Chicago’s Commercial Club, New York’s Regional Plan Association, and San Francisco’s Greenbelt Alliance.

Implementation is another matter. The problem is that regional government has not had the authority to implement regional plans effectively, says Kathryn A. Foster, associate professor of urban and regional planning at SUNY-Buffalo. All regional planning efforts must answer three key governance questions, she wrote in *Regional Planning in America*, a collection of essays published earlier this year. Those are: By what authority are the efforts undertaken? Who exercises that authority? And what territory is involved?

Planning for regional issues becomes more pronounced and more critical when economies are struggling, says Susan Christopherson, professor of urban and regional planning at Cornell University. “Research shows that actions taken after a shock to a regional economy occur are largely ineffective. Planners have to anticipate change and strategically plan for it,” she says.

In addition, regions are fluid. “Regional planning counts on people working across boundaries,” says Ethan Seltzer, professor of urban studies and planning at Portland State University and coeditor with Armando Carbonell, aicp, of *Regional Planning in America: Practice and Prospect*, published this year. “The question is how can we get to an alignment in space and priorities?” Seltzer, who studied with Ian McHarg at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1970s, is optimistic that the new Sustainable Communities initiative might help to correct this alignment issue.

Sustainable Communities is an initiative of the Interagency Partnership for Sustainable Communities. HUD implements the program but coordinates efforts with the U.S. Department of Transportation and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. According to the partnership’s website: “The Partnership is committed to advancing six overarching Livability Principles as a framework to help American families gain better access to affordable housing, more transportation options and lower transportation costs, while protecting the environment and reducing our energy dependence.”

The program addresses two of three key tasks that Seltzer identifies as critical in regional planning: defining the region and organizing it by common interests. The third task of any regional planning project is stewarding regional boundaries, says Seltzer, adding that this is a long-term challenge for the HUD program.

To date the HUD Office of Housing and Sustainable Communities has awarded nearly $100 million in new grants to support more livable and sustainable communities throughout the U.S. Forty-five regional areas have received funding designed to foster economic development by connecting housing with access to jobs, schools, and transportation.

One grantee of the federal initiative is the New York and Connecticut region—called the NY-CT Sustainable Communities Consortium—which received $3.5 million in planning grants this year. The consortium consists of nine cities, two counties, six metropolitan planning organizations, and two regional planning organizations in the bistate area. The grants are being managed through the Regional Plan Association, a New York-based nonprofit created in 1929 and one of the first regional planning agencies in the U.S. Now RPA can link three different federal agencies with local planners to more effectively implement regional planning goals.

**The consortium**

“It feels different at HUD now,” says Salin Geevarghese, senior advisor in HUD’s Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities. “The office was newly created and has no historical antecedent, and so we are learning new ways to work together. We are getting out of our individual silos of DOT, HUD, and EPA.” Geevarghese was what he called the HUD “point person” for the NY-CT consortium last summer and helped launch the program with RPA and others.

“We meet every two weeks with DOT and EPA in New York City to assess the needs and issues of localities and see what the federal government can bring to the table to better promote economic development,” says Jose Velez, CPD Representative, HUD’s Office of Community Planning and Development. “This collaboration is huge and has never been done before,” he says.

The New York Metropolitan Transpor-
Projects

NEW YORK & CONNECTICUT SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

Regional Projects:
- Plan Enhancement & Integration
- Climate Resilience
- Regional Housing Assessment
- Housing Opportunities Fund

The consortium has identified 16 interrelated projects, four of which are regionwide. Several are TOD projects, including four large ones in Connecticut and a feasibility study of infill development around three Long Island Rail Road stations in Nassau County.

The consortium aims to coordinate 16 interrelated projects in New York City, Long Island, Connecticut, and the Hudson Valley, as well as three regionwide projects with interlocking grant activities. Three of the projects are described below.

According to Bogacz, the tristate regional planning commission (which included New Jersey) dissolved in 1992 and smaller MPOs were created in its wake. Now with the Sustainable Communities initiative, the MPO coordinates with four sister MPOs. Bogacz worked closely with the RPA to bring the groups together to form the consortium.

The RPA began convening participants for the grants program last February, says Chris Jones, RPA's vice president for research. "This is the first time since the 1970s that there is federal interest in a federal agency partnership coming together. I have never seen such an overwhelming response to a funding notice in the New York and Connecticut area."

Commuter rail is the transportation backbone of the region and the spatial organizing concept of the consortium's program. Connecticut communities historically have very strong ties to New York City through commuter rail lines, and the regional issues facing Connecticut today are as critical as...
Putting Livability First

Everyone in Columbia, Tennessee, knows there is a problem. Though the city is just 35 miles south of Nashville and within the state’s epicenter of new growth and development, there have been precious few investments in recent decades.

Columbia has been passed over by many and left by a few more. In 2009, it lost 1,200 manufacturing jobs when General Motors went bankrupt. By 2011, it suffered 14.5 percent unemployment, the highest in the state. Population growth has stagnated to the third slowest rate statewide. And although the population is relatively stable at 34,600, middle-aged residents with families have fled the city since 2000. These are rarities for a Sun Belt city of Columbia’s size but not uncommon in the nation at large.

The poor conditions are evident in the commercial heart of the city, a five-lane highway corridor known as James Campbell Boulevard, which is dotted with darkened storefronts and empty parking lots. The boulevard, which is such in name only, is the embodiment of the city’s greatest disadvantage: the lack of livability. To create positive change, bring new jobs, and attract new families, Columbia must develop the livable environment it doesn’t yet have.

As common sense as this sounds, the solution is a new idea here. The concept of livability was introduced only when the Partnership for Sustainable Communities—a collaboration of HUD, DOT, and EPA—selected Columbia in October 2010 as one of 62 cities to participate in the Community Challenge Planning Grant program. The program assumes that cities can develop in more sustainable ways by improving the livability of their most troubled areas. It was introduced in conjunction with the Regional Planning Grant, but provides funding for planning efforts on the community scale.

Columbia received $250,000 to prepare a new highway corridor plan, which would become a blueprint for sprawl repair for the whole city. The planning department staff led the planning team; its share of the work accounted for the city’s financial match. Designers, engineers, and economists from the consulting firm Town Planning & Urban Design Collaborative, which has an office in Nashville, made up the rest of the team.

The team moved very quickly after work began last June. Core analysis was completed that month. A seven-day charrette was held in July, with the refinement of preliminary designs and a final plan delivered in August. Throughout these months, the work was the central conversation for the entire community, and a weekly—sometimes daily—feature in the local newspaper.

At least 300 citizens, 50 business owners, and several state agencies took part in the conversation. Collaboration with fellow grantees—something the federal program encourages—from as far away as Burlington, Vermont, and as nearby as Knoxville was particularly helpful, since they face the same challenges and are considering some of the same solutions.

The completed plan, The Boulevard 2050, will help Columbia make a fundamental shift toward true sustainable development. The plan’s most important element is the highway retrofit, aimed at transforming the roadway from a five-lane bypass to a multiway boulevard complete with pedestrian and cyclist facilities, street trees, narrowed lanes, and safer design.

An essential element is the redevelopment of the strip commercial area, which will change to a more nodal, or center-based, form. This is best seen in the plan’s “catalytic development site,” the enclosed shopping mall. Following the lead of Mizner Park in Boca Raton, Florida, and similar grayfield redevelopments, this neglected monolith is expected to become a vibrant lifestyle center with civic space, high density, mixed uses, and a unique design that respects Columbia’s rich local character. Best of all, market analysis shows that this new center is feasible for construction today, even in Columbia’s challenged economy.

But the real work still lies ahead. The Boulevard 2050 was approved unanimously by the planning commission and is expected to be adopted by the city council this month. The next step, implementation, will be the most daunting, but some success can already be claimed: A city that has been mired in crisis now has a way out. Columbia is now actively redeveloping its most important corridor into the livable, sustainable place that its residents deserve. And although the challenge will be great, the plan makes the solutions clear—and thus feasible.

Best of all, Columbia’s is only one story of many. Sixty-one other communities participating in the Sustainable Communities initiative will complete their own plans in the coming year.

Norman Wright, AICP

Wright is the planning director of Columbia, Tennessee.
Four large-scale TOD projects are being considered along Metro North's New Haven line. Three plans include a study for a new commuter rail station in Stamford, initial work on a TOD master plan for South Norwalk, and a study for converting New Haven's historic Union Station into a more intermodal facility. The fourth plan concerns Bridgeport, Connecticut's largest city.

**Bridgeport's Barnum Station**

HUD's Sustainable Communities Regionalal Grant Program awarded Bridgeport a $186,000 grant for a study assessing the feasibility of building a commuter rail station near the struggling neighborhoods of the East End and the East Side. The study is part of a larger city project called the East Bridgeport Development Corridor, initiated by Mayor Bill Finch, which aims to create a second Northeast Corridor rail access point for the whole region.

The city hopes that the Barnum Station redevelopment will be a foothold to the city's redevelopment efforts for mixed use transit-oriented development and affordable housing in the area.

A former industrial site operated by Remington Arms, but dormant for decades, the 700-acre brownfield is located in the heart of the city, according to Don Eversley, Bridgeport's planning director. The city owns some of the land, including an underused waterfront park; the Bridgeport Housing Authority owns a vacant housing site, and the area is adjacent to several major rail connections.

Because Bridgeport is only a one-hour train ride from New York City, Eversley sees the potential for the Bridgeport Barnum Station to support the entire regional economy. "What is exciting here is that each of the communities involved has local projects woven into a regional approach," he says of the Sustainable Communities initiative. "All are different, but follow core principles, connecting into a strong region, moving people from less connected areas into more connected areas for jobs and housing."

Regionalism is becoming more relevant for Bridgeport because of changing work patterns in the area, including "a strong reverse commute over the past 10 years, reflecting the Southwest Connecticut financial boom," says Eversley.

**Around New York**

The Sustainable Communities initiative is also a good fit for New York City's regional efforts. The city's planning department is leading three programs through the initiative: the Bronx Metro-North Corridor, Sustainable East New York, and a climate resilience strategy (explained in the sidebar on page 26).

"We are seeing strong local leadership for the Sustainable Communities initiative, as well as a tremendous amount of political will and support because it is reinforcing planning in land use and transit. It is consistent with Mayor Bloomberg's PlaNYC," says Sarah Goldwyn, the planning department's director of planning coordination. She represents the planning department on the NY-CT Sustainable Communities Consortium and has been elected cochair of the organization's steering committee.

Another benefit: opportunities for disadvantaged communities, for example through the Sustainable East New York project. "No one has looked at East New York in this way before," says Purnima Kapur, director of the planning department's Brooklyn office. The geographical area for the project, Brooklyn's Cypress Hills and East New York neighborhoods, is one of the city's poorest and remains largely undeveloped, according to Kapur. But its infrastructure is excellent and its subway and train connections have great potential, she says.

Kapur cites redevelopment around Yankee Stadium as a good recent precedent of how the planning department and the local community supported mass transit, strengthening the area economically in the process. Moreover, the HUD grant program is the first opportunity that Kapur's office has had to work in a truly multijurisdictional way, she says. The East New York project will plan for new mixed income housing, improved access to employment and transportation, streetscape improvements, and opportunities for more healthy food options.

Similarly, the Bronx Metro-North Corridor project is hoping to support community development not just in its area, but in surrounding neighborhoods as well, according to Goldwyn, who manages the study. The project could help to reconfigure the design of commuter rail stations to make them more inviting and visible, as well as to provide better pedestrian access, with the goal of "connecting area residents to job centers in the region," according to Goldwyn. The city will launch the program with community workshops in the fall and winter.

**Good things take time**

One term mentioned by many of the participants in the NY-CT consortium is leverage, whether it is leveraging rezoning in the Bronx, securing future funding for the Bridgeport station, or supporting many other anticipated projects. And so the initiative is off to a running start with the NY-CT consortium.

Of course, there is the $64,000 regional planning question. As Chris Jones puts it, "Will this be something more than a collection of our individual objectives?"

With federal involvement cross-referencing with local community interactions, perhaps the answer will at last be "yes."

---

Cory Buckwalter Berkowitz is a writer and a former director of planning for Schuyler County, New York. She has kept her original copy of McHarg's Design with Nature for decades.

**RESOURCES**

**AT PRESS TIME**

The Sustainable Communities Initiative appears to be a casualty of a November 14 federal budget agreement between the House and Senate. Go to http://blogs.planning.org/policy for the latest.

**IN PRINT**


**ON THE WEB**
