The New York Metro area revisits a traditional concept

By Corry Buckwalter Berkooz

Signs of a New Regionalism?

Targeted projects in Bridgeport, Connecticut, include park upgrades (above, an "after" view) and transportation fixes. In the second category is a possible commuter rail station for the city's east side (site map, left) whose feasibility study is being funded by a HUD Sustainable Communities regional grant.

Regional planning has ridden up and down a rollercoaster of popularity in the U.S. From those who led the way—Jane Jacobs, Louis Wirth, Jan Mellich—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 is to create and implement regional plans.
Building Climate Resilience in New York City

We have 530 miles of waterfront in New York City, and it is very diverse—from lower Manhattan’s skyline to natural green areas and parks,” says Howard Sklans, director of sustainability for New York City’s Department of City Planning. “This entire coastline and much of the infrastructure in these low-lying areas will be affected by sea-level rise, and so will the nearly half-a-million people who live in areas that may be at risk for coastal flooding in the future, according to Sklans.

The DCP manages a climate resilience effort through a Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant coordinated by HUD. “The project largely focuses on transit, and we are aware that where our transit is or need the water in New York City is a huge issue due to climate change,” says Sklans.

The 20th century saw the average temperature in the New York metropolitan region increase by two degrees Fahrenheit, according to researchers at the Institute for Sustainable Cities at the City University of New York. By the end of the 21st century, New York City’s mean annual temperatures are expected to go up by four to 7.5 degrees Fahrenheit, according to a report by the New York City Panel on Climate Change. Annual precipitation is also projected to increase by five to 10 percent, and sea levels to rise by 12 to 23 inches, which means flooding and storm surge mitigation efforts are in order for densely populated urban areas.

The HUD Climate Resilience Project will develop a range of best practice adaptation strategies that have potential for implementation throughout the region to reduce risk to people and property, within New York City as well as in coastal areas of Connecticut and Long Island that are vulnerable to sea-level rise. “We will be creating a menu of coastal strategies as tools for climate resilience for all types of development along the waterfront, from high density to parks,” says Sklans.

The initial task force for the Department of City Planning, which is working in cooperation with the Mayor’s Office of Long Term Planning and Sustainability, includes three major forces: an analysis of urban design implications of enhanced flood protection for buildings, a study of best practices for building coastal resilience, and an evaluation of critical infrastructure design standards, conducted with the input of a range of stakeholders through community outreach efforts, according to Chris Jones, vice president of research for the Regional Planning Association. RPA administers the grant for the city.

The grant supports ongoing work in increasing climate resilience, including efforts of the NYC+35 task force, a set of climate change projections that have been adopted by New York City and New York State. Staff will also work closely with the New York City Climate Change Adaptation Task Force, a committee of public and private citizens who own and operate key infrastructure systems working on risk assessment and identifying adaptive strategies for the city’s essential infrastructure. The grants have two years to complete the study and share their menu of strategies with the region, according to Sklans.

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 Planning Association, and San Francisco’s Great Highway Alliance.

Implementation is another matter. The problem is that regional government has not had the authority to implement regional plans effectively, says Kathleen A. Foster, associate professor of urban and regional planning at SUNY-Buffalo. All regional planning efforts must vote on three key governance questions, she wrote in Regional Planning in America, a collection of essays published earlier this year. Those are: What are the authorities the states are underlaw? What states are exercising control? 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 the future,” she says.

In addition, regions are fluid. “Regional planning counts on people working across boundaries,” says Ethan Selzer, professor of urban studies and planning at Portland State University and co-editor with Armando Carbonell, 6095, of Regional Planning in America: Practice and Project, published this year. “The question is how can we get to an alignment in space and priorities?” Selzer, who studied with Ian McFerrin 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, “It is a cooperative effort to ensure that decisions are made that align with the efforts of the federal government to advancing our 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 Selzer 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 Selzer, 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 bimetric 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 organizations in the U.S. Now RPA can link three different federal agencies with local planners to more effectively implement regional planning goals.

The consortium “In efforts local at HUD now,” says Salita Georgewtech, 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.” Georgewtech was what he called the HUD “point person” for the NY-CT consortium late last year and helped launch the program with RPA and HUD.

“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 do to be table to better promote economic development,” says Jose Velez, CPF Representative, 6115, HUD Office of Community Planning and Development. “The connection is huge and has never been done before,” he says. The New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority serves 16 million people in a 2,000-square-mile area of New York City, Long Island, southeastern New York, and Connecticut, with an average weekday rider- ship of 8.5 million. With some of the most densely populated areas in the U.S. as a whole, the New York and Connecticut region has an economic output of about $800 billion.

“We have an enormous transportation system, which is old and sprawling and needs resources to maintain,” saysergy Bogies, the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council’s director of planning. He is co-coordinator of the consortium with the RPA and gives perspective from the large- est metropolitan planning organization in the partnership. “For our MPO, the Sustainable Communities initiative is probably the most powerful and exciting thing we have been involved in transportation,” says Bogies.

According to Bogies, 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. Bogies 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 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.”

The consortium aims to coordinate 16 interrelated projects in New York City, Long Island, Connecticut, and the Hudson Valley, as well as three regionalwide projects with interlocking grant activities. Three of the projects are described below. The overarching goals are “to work together to develop livable communities and growth centers around the region’s commuter rail network that will expand economic opportunity by engaging and connecting residents to jobs, foster new affordable, energy-efficient housing, provide more transportation choices, strengthen existing communities and make the region more globally competitive,” according to the consortium’s website, sustainablenyct.org.

Jones admits that organizing so many communities and groups has been challenging, but with several steering committee meeting completed and more to come, many communities already are “starting to have conversations about working together and sharing resources for the first time,” he says. Commuter rail is the transportation backbone of the region and the spatial organizing concept of the consortium’s programs. Connecticut metropolitan areas 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 gains in recent years.

Columbia has been passed over by many and left by a few more. In 2009, it lost 1,000 manufacturing jobs when General Motors went bankrupt. By 2011, it suffered 14.5 percent unemployment, the highest in the state. Population growth stagnated at the third slowest rate statewide in the state, and the city was rated at 34,000, 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 known as University Boulevard, which is dotted with darkened storefronts and empty parking lots. The boulevard, which is in need of repair, 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 find a vital environment it doesn’t have yet.

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 program. The program expects cities to 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 $151,000 to update 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, whose output work was the result of the communities’ efforts. The project will include a community workshop, a public meeting, and a follow-up newsletter.

The team moved very quickly after work began in 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. By mid-October, the report was complete. The study was the central conversation for the entire community, and a weekly—sometimes daily—feature in the local newspaper.

At least 100 citizens, 30 business owners, and several state agencies took part in the conversation. Collaboration with junior partners—smaller federal program enforces—came from as far away as Birmingham, Fort Worth, and as near as Nashville was particularly helpful, because 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 corridor plan, which will change a more corridor, or center-based, form. This is best seen in the plan’s “developmental sites,” the enclosed shopping mall. The mall’s开发商 Park at Bocurazu Florida, and similar grayfield development, this neglected monster is expected to become a vibrant lifestyle center, a reflection of higher order, and a unique design that respects Columbia’s rich character. Best of all, market analysis shows that this new center is feasible for construction today, even in Columbia’s challenging economy.

But the real work still lies ahead. The Boulevard 2050 was approved unanimously by the planning commission and expects to be adopted by the city council this month. The next steps, 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.

However, the challenge will be great, and the plan will make the solutions clear—and, if done well, the right. Best of all, Columbia’s is only one story of many. Sixty-one other communities participating in the Sustainable Communities Initiative will complete their plans in the coming year.

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Timely is the planning director of Columbia, Tennessee.

Connecticut steps up

After Minnesota’s county government systems were eliminated five years ago, several small, 11 MPOs eventually filled the vacuum. These MPOs have "no authority and are generally ad hoc partnerships," according to Doug Koons, senior vice president of the Metropolitan Planning Council. "Due to our situation in Connecticut we decided that the existing MPOs would represent smaller towns and villages and principal cities, which would represent the three cities in the corridor," says Koons. "Now we have a corridor from New York to Boston in an equal and coordinated regional activity." But despite its reputation for wealth, Connecticut does have problems, according to Koons. Many communities are suffering from the effects of the housing market, and the state has had a net job growth since 1989. Still, the state has a strong planning tradition, he adds: "We have a generation of land-use planning in a polycentric region made up of many downtowns. Each of these MPOs has long-range plans. And they are all more or less similar in language."

The RWPs first task will be to look at all of these plans and bring the architects and planners together to identify areas of concern and disagreement, Koons says.

Now with the Sustainable Communities initiative, he has some hope for implementation of these existing community plans as these calls for TOD, affordable housing near transit, and green infrastructure. "We are aligning discussions among all municipalities, state agencies, and federal agencies," says Koons.

Six Principles

The Livability Principles as defined by the Intergovernmental Partnership for Sustainable Communities are:

1. Provide more transportation choices
2. Promote equitable, affordable housing
3. Enhance economic competitiveness
4. Support existing communities
5. Coordinate policies and leverage investment
6. Value place identities and neighborhoods

Four large-scale TOD projects are being considered along Metro North’s New Haven line. The projects include a study for a new commuter rail station in Stamford, initial work on a TOD master plan for South Norwalk, a study for a connecting commuter rail station in New Haven’s historic Union Station into a more integrated facility. The fourth project concerns Bridgeport, Connecticut’s largest city.

Bridgeport’s Barnum Station

HUD’s Sustainable Communities Regional Grant program awarded Bridgeport a $1.5 million grant to study enhancing 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 Northern Bridgeport rail access point for the whole region.

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

A former industrial site operated by Hammon Electronics for several years, the 700-acre brownfield is located in the heart of the city, according to Don Eyresker, Bridgeport’s director of development. The site contains the land of the original, including an endorsed waterfront park; the Bridgeport Housing Authority owns a vacant housing site, and the area is adjacent to the city’s downtown businesses.

Becoming Bridgeport is only a one-hour train ride from New York City, Eyresker says the potential for the Bridgeport Barnum Station to support the entire region’s housing market. "What is exciting here is that each of the communities involved has local projects working 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 convenient areas into more convenient areas for jobs and housing."

Regionalism is becoming more relevant for Bridgeport because of changing patterns in Connecticut, including a "strong reverse commute over the past 10 years," protecting the Southwest Connecticut financial icons, says Eyresker.

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 Gateway, 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 Goldyne, the planning department’s director of planning coordination. She represents the planning department on the NYCT-Sustainable Communities Consortium and has been elected chair 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 Pentina Kapoor, 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 Kapoor. As its infrastructure is excellent, it needs a train station and train connections have great potential, she says. Kapoor cites redevelopment around Yankee Stadium as a good recent precedent of how the planning department and the local community supported mass transit, strengthening their community area in the process. Moreover, the HUD grant program is the first opportunity that Kapoor’s office has had to work in a multidisciplinary way, the way.

The East New York project will plan for new mixed income housing, improved transit access, new greenspace amenities, school improvements, and opportunities for more healthy food options.

Similarly, the Bronx Metro-North Corridor project is working to support community development not just in its area, but in surrounding neighborhoods as well, according to Goldyne, 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 pedestrian access with the goal of “connecting area residents to jobs centers in the region,” according to Goldyne. 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 participating nonprofits in the NYCT consortium is leverage, whether it is leveraging 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 NYCT consortium.

Of course, there is the $64,000 regional planning question: “Will this be something more than a collection of our individual objectives?”

With federal incentives cross-referencing with local community interactions, perhaps the answer will at last be “yes.”

Nathan Wright, AIA

Nathan Wright is the planning director of Columbia, Tennessee.