

PlaNYC: EJ Group Takes the Inside Track to Advocate Sustainability

By Peggy Shepard, Stephanie Tyree, and Cecil Corbin-Mark

The explosive growth of urban centers worldwide has forced government and civil societies to grapple with the question of how to manage population growth without destroying the environment, while simultaneously ensuring economic prosperity. The quest for this balance is commonly captured by the phrase “sustainable development.” By any measure, achieving sustainable development is a significant challenge. However, when you try to make New York City—the world’s financial and entertainment capital—sustainable, you need more than chutzpah; you need environmental justice (EJ).

Sustainable development is often presented as a traditional environmental issue, but the forces that led to its emergence are not the traditional “greens.” Any credible analysis of sustainable development will reveal that it was social justice movements that propelled the “greens” into thinking in terms of equity and justice for present and future generations. While several other “world cities” (London, Stockholm, and Singapore to name a few) beat New York to the punch in planning for sustainable futures, none can take credit for approaching sustainability from an EJ perspective, as New York has.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s PlaNYC 2030 is bold and ambitious in its effort to transform the way city government engages in long range planning. It is also the first sustainability plan, to our knowledge, that seeks to address the multiple public health challenges that communities face from the many noxious and polluting facilities they house. However, the process itself was not a community-driven planning process. The story that follows speaks to the need for an EJ voice in every phase of the development and execution of any sustainability planning process. We share it in the hopes that it will serve as a guidepost for future EJ workers.

Planning a Greener, Greater New York

In the Fall of 2006, West Harlem Environmental Action, Inc. (WE ACT) received a call from Rit

Aggarwala, the new director of the mayor’s Office of Sustainability and Long Range Planning. The mayor, recognizing that the city’s aging infrastructure and antiquated policies could not withstand the immediate impacts of climate change and the expected influx of one million new residents by 2030, was embarking on a program to create a “greener, greater New York.” The purpose of the call was (a) to disclose that the mayor wanted to move quickly to form a diverse Sustainability Advisory Board to shape the plan that had been outlined by Aggarwala and his consultants over the past two months; (b) to elicit WE ACT’s top priorities regarding sustainability issues; and (c) to determine WE ACT’s willingness to serve on the advisory board and participate in the frequent work group meetings.

WE ACT’s decision to join the 25-member Advisory Board, which included environmental and civic groups, businesses, academics, and another EJ group (UPROSE), was based on the potential opportunity to influence the plan for the benefit of EJ communities, as well as our past positive interactions with the mayor and his agencies. One such interaction had resulted in the City’s agreeing to fund and build a waterfront park (set to open in Spring 2008) that was the product of a community-visioning process led by WE ACT and the local community board. Another involved the Mayor’s decision to keep a Harlem-based garbage marine transfer station out of the City’s Solid



Waste Management Plan after WE ACT and groups in Northern Manhattan mobilized to keep it closed. The new plan called for transfer stations to be expanded and reopened in more affluent white neighborhoods.

At the first meeting attended by the mayor and chaired thereafter by the Deputy Mayor for Economic Development, Dan Doctoroff, a draft outline of principles and key issues was presented for the board's consideration. Though the screen of public health raised by the two EJ groups did not immediately become part of the plan, the principle of equity was incorporated. The group advocated consistently for open space, land use, and affordable housing to be incorporated into the plan, but the mayor had been convening a number of other advisory boards that developed plans to address affordable housing, jobs, and poverty.

Environmental Justice and the City

It soon became clear that the long-term vision for the plan would focus narrowly on infrastructure needs and metrics that would enable the city to effectively track and evaluate its progress. PlaNYC was never envisioned as a broad-based planning process that engaged area residents. To achieve its goal of ensuring that New York's growth over the next 20 years would benefit both the economy and local residents' quality of life, the city is initiating measures that reduce its carbon footprint, update obsolete energy and water infrastructures, clean up contaminated land, increase access to open space, provide sustainable and affordable housing, and improve the regional public transportation system.

Eight work groups—focused on Solid Waste, Energy, Water, Open Space/Land Use, Financials, Transportation, Buildings/Infrastructure, and Sustainable Procurement/Best Business Practices—and

staffed by more than a dozen city agencies, were established to support the advisory board in its effort to develop a sustainability policy. Advisory group members were able to discuss the issues with city agency officials, advance ideas for pilot projects, and make recommendations, some of which were incorporated into the plan. It was a challenging, intensive process that required the constant involvement of three WE ACT staff, as well as several meetings between Aggarwala and the EJ community to keep EJ principles, initiatives, and perspectives alive.

The mayor announced PlaNYC and its 127 initiatives on Earth Day 2007. Surprising to everyone was the inclusion of a congestion pricing proposal (to encourage a reduction in traffic pollution and generate revenue to enhance mass transit). The proposal—which would charge a fee for all vehicles entering or leaving a pre-defined congestion zone in midtown Manhattan during certain hours—ignited a media frenzy that lasted until the July recess of the state legislature, which passed a bill authorizing the city to accept a \$400 million grant from the United States Department of Transportation's congestion mitigation fund. The proposal continues to be controversial a year later. The mayor's announcement also kicked off a process of public consultation that included community town halls, a round robin of city visits to community and civic groups, and an onslaught of public recommendations to the city's PlaNYC website.

The Campaign for New York's Future

In the days leading to the announcement, members of the Advisory Board had formed a coalition of 75 groups—the Campaign For New York's Future—to ensure the plan's feasibility and implementation through successive mayoral administrations.

Photo:

Willoughby Street before and after street closure.

The stretch of road in Downtown Brooklyn was relatively unused by pedestrians or autos. In 2006, the New York Department of Transportation reclaimed the road space as a new public plaza. Before completion, people had already started to gather at the colorful collection of chairs, tables, umbrellas, and planters that replaced the curved stretch of empty roadway.

And it cost less than \$100,000.

Credit: NYC Department of Transportation

City officials and campaign members helped secure significant funding for the campaign from several foundations and hired a campaign director. Trying to secure state legislation in the two months before the legislative recess required daily and overnight visits to Albany to lobby and educate legislators on congestion pricing and other key financing mechanisms needed to implement the initiatives. There were press conferences twice a week highlighting the support of city and state elected officials. Currently, the campaign is engaged in seeking city council legislation that would institutionalize both, the plan and the mayor's office of Sustainability and Long Range Planning.

Some advisory board members hired staff to lobby elected officials and consultants to develop commercials highlighting the environmental health advantages of congestion pricing. One foundation held a funders' breakfast to support the two EJ groups and help us maintain our participation in the project.

Countdown for PlaNYC

Mayor Bloomberg posts a countdown of the number of days left in his administration to institutionalize the plan and accomplish his goals. He has made it clear that it will be in the hands of the advocates to monitor the progress of the plan, which is posted on the city's website and features two progress reports.

WE ACT has developed a scope of work that includes community education and consultation, briefings for elected officials, and the hiring of a policy staffer to coordinate campaign work, analyze the plan to assess opportunities and challenges, advise elected officials, and work to secure benefits and pilot projects for EJ communities. WE ACT has also partnered with the Earth Institute to conduct a study on the potential impacts of congestion pricing on Northern Manhattan communities. The final report of this study—a unique partnership between WE ACT and land use experts at Columbia University—recommends certain measures for the city to mitigate the potential negative impacts of congestion pricing.

Most importantly, the collaborative study has enabled WE ACT to consider concerns raised by community members and local politicians, and

conduct an analysis of the scope of likely impacts and the feasibility of mitigation measures. In particular, the study has focused on the potential for an increase in park-and-ride activity by commuters seeking to avoid the daily congestion charge, and the capacity of buses and subways to handle the anticipated increase.

Environmental Justice—Five Boroughs Wide

WE ACT has also worked to increase community engagement in and knowledge of all aspects of PlaNYC by holding a town hall meeting in Central Harlem in conjunction with Manhattan Community Boards 9 through 12. The forum gave community members an opportunity to discuss with Aggarwala and other mayoral staff, those aspects of PlaNYC that will directly affect Harlem. WE ACT also released preliminary findings from its Earth Institute study, which included a determination that while park-and-ride activity is unlikely to significantly increase in Northern Manhattan where most neighborhoods are already near 100 percent capacity for on-street parking, congestion pricing may increase the price and demand for off-street parking.

The second portion of the report determined that the anticipated two percent increase (around 75,000) in daily riders would put many subway lines at or beyond capacity and necessitate significant investments in transit improvements and expansion. WE ACT hopes that its study will contribute to public dialogue on PlaNYC and encourage the city to put in place necessary measures to mitigate the impacts of congestion pricing prior to its implementation.

PlaNYC is designed to ensure that New York City grows sustainably over the next few decades. WE ACT has remained engaged in the process to ensure that the burdens and benefits of this sustainable growth are distributed in an equitable manner. Even though the Plan affects the city as a whole, the environmental, health, and social burdens historically placed on Northern Manhattan communities make the impacts of PlaNYC of particular concern to these neighborhoods. WE ACT and other community groups' involvement and continued engagement with PlaNYC works to advance the goal of a liveable, healthy and environmentally just city. ■

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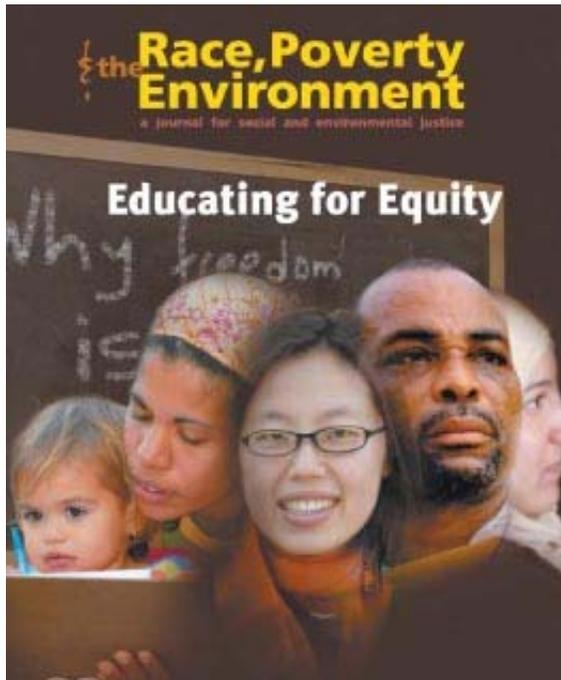
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