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Signs of a New Regionalism?

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 ineffectual. 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 Transportation Authority serves 14.6 million people in a 5,000-square-mile area of New York City, Long Island, southeastern New York, and Connecticut, with an average weekday ridership 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," says Gerry Bogacz, the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council's director of planning. He is co-coordinator of the consortium program with the RPA and gives perspective from the largest 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 in transportation," says Bogacz.

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."

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.

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 creating 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, www.sustainablenyct.org.

Jones admits that organizing so many communities and groups has been challenging, but with several steering committee meetings 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 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 ever in more than a century of commuter transportation.



Connecticut steps up

After Connecticut's county government system was eliminated in the 1960s, 15 MPOs eventually filled the vacuum. Those MPOs have "no authority and are generally ad hoc partnerships," according to David Kooris, AICP, RPA's vice president for Connecticut. "Due to our situation in Connecticut we decided that the existing MPOs would represent smaller towns and villages and principal cities would represent themselves in the consortium," says Kooris. "Now we have a corridor from New York to Boston engaged in similar and coordinated regional activities."

Despite its reputation for wealth, Connecticut does have problems, according to Kooris. Many communities are suffering from outmigration, and the state has not had 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 saying the same thing."

RPA's first task will be to look at all of these plans and bring the authors and implementers together to identify areas of consensus and disagreement, Kooris says.

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

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

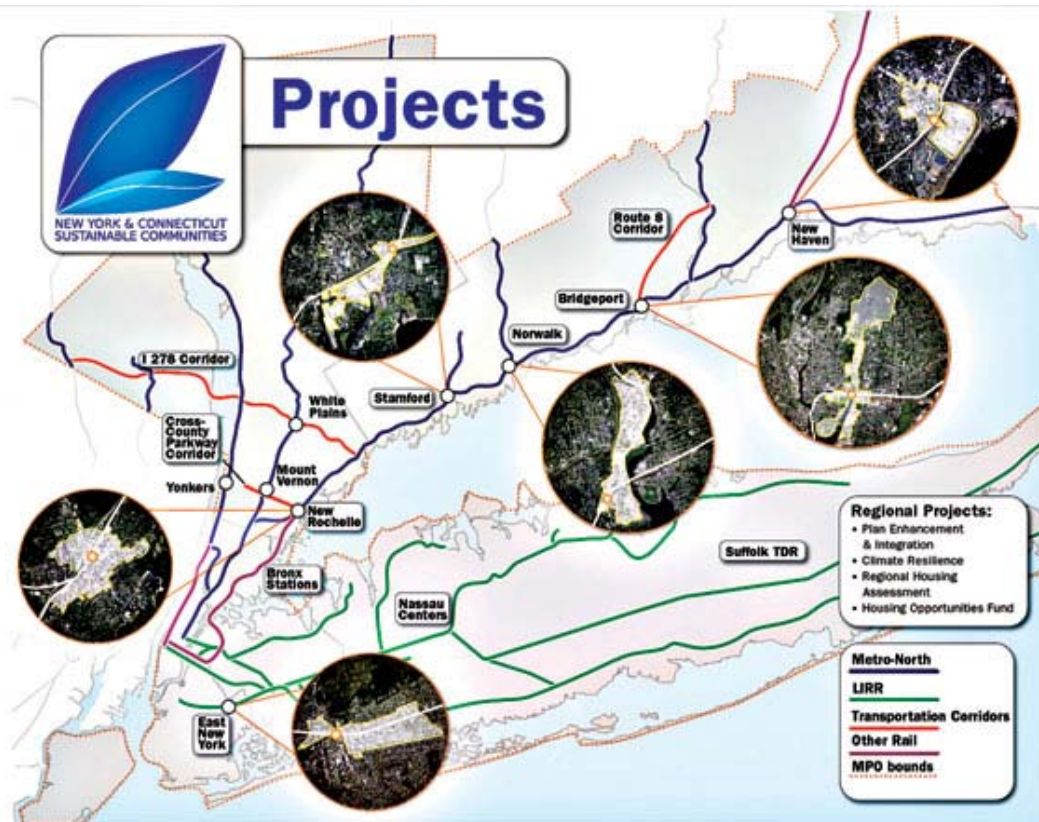
HUD's Sustainable Communities Regional Grant Program awarded Bridgeport a \$186,000 grant for a study assessing the feasibility of building a commuter rail station near the struggling neighborhoods of the East End and the East Side. The study is part of a larger city project called the East Bridgeport 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 planning 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."

Corry Buckwalter Berkooz 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.

Six Principles

The Livability Principles as defined by the Interagency 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 communities and neighborhoods
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Resources

Images: Top — Target projects in Bridgeport, Connecticut, include park upgrades (rendering) and transportation fixes. Image courtesy Sasaki and City of Bridgeport. Middle — In the second category is a possible commuter rail station for the city's east side whose feasibility study is being funded by a HUD Sustainable Communities regional grant. Image courtesy Sasaki and City of Bridgeport. Bottom — 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. Image New York-Connecticut Sustainable Communities consortium.

In print: *Regional Planning in America: Practice and Prospect*, edited by Ethan Seltzer and Armando Carbonell, AICP, Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2011. *The Regional City: Planning for the End of Sprawl*, Peter Calthorpe and William Fulton, Island Press, 2001. *Remaking Regional Economies: Power, Labor and Firm Strategies in the Knowledge Economy*, Susan Christopherson and Jennifer Clark, 2007, Routledge Studies in Economic Geography.

On the web: New York and Connecticut Sustainable Communities:
www.sustainablenyct.org/about

Regional Planning Association: www.rpa.org

Bridgeport Barnum Station Feasibility Study:
www.sustainablenyct.org/library/doc/Bridgeport_Barnum_Train_Station_Presentation.pdf

New York City Planning Department: www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/sustainable_communities/

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