

LIVABLE NEIGHBORHOODS FOR A LIVABLE CITY:

Policy Recommendations to Strengthen
Community-Based Planning in New York City

2005



Prepared by the Municipal Art Society Planning Center on behalf of
the Community-Based Planning Task Force

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PREFACE

At a time when New York is engaged in the most ambitious and widespread development planning in decades, the conflicting visions of city planners, developers and local neighborhoods have never been more apparent and the stakes have never been higher.

The constant media attention and unparalleled public and private resources being devoted to examining and monitoring the city's plans for the next 50 years indicates that New York's current planning process is out of date, out of touch, and out of ideas. It is time to adopt new planning tools and methods that would allow for a truly participatory process that takes community-based planning seriously.

Cities across the nation and the world as diverse as Seattle, Washington and Porto Allegro, Brazil have embraced community-based planning as the way to do business. Developers, planners, designers, communities, and municipal agencies in these cities agree that although the process is never easy, a true commitment to a planning process beginning with local visions results in faster, less costly, and more innovative planning and development.

The concept of community-based planning was at the heart of why New York City's community boards were created—a fine innovation of the 1960s. Four decades later, despite the tireless efforts of their members and staff, community boards and community-based organizations have few real opportunities to engage in proactive planning and even fewer opportunities to ensure that development suits neighborhood needs.

It is time to rethink how we plan our city. An engine of innovation in countless ways, New York City falls short of this reputation when it comes to planning for the future of our own backyards. The Community-Based Planning Task Force offers *Livable Neighborhoods for a Livable City* as an invitation to begin a dialogue about using New York's diversity to strengthen its planning process.

I. INTRODUCTION

New York City is gradually but perceptibly being reshaped, one neighborhood, sometimes even one block, at a time. New York City residents are joining forces with each other and like-minded organizations to find creative solutions to local problems. Nos Quedamos, a group in the South Bronx, for example, worked for many years and succeeded in altering an urban renewal plan to suit the existing neighborhood's needs, and has now constructed nearly 700 residential units and 30,000 square feet of commercial space. The Organization of Waterfront Neighborhoods convinced the city of a better way to manage solid waste removal and to phase out inland, truck-based waste facilities. A community in Bushwick, Brooklyn, joined forces with the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) and a local housing developer to plan collectively for a long-vacant brownfield site and use it to help achieve a community vision for housing, commercial and recreational development. The 170-unit residential complex is nearly completed.

Neighborhood residents are seizing opportunities and devising plans that reflect their vision. Many communities have done this—some through the officially-established process called 197-a planning;¹ some outside of this process yet equally devoted to the concept of consensus-driven planning—resulting in a blueprint for the neighborhood created by the people who live and work there.

On paper, New York City government has what appears to be strong support for community-based planning. The city Charter's original intent was to fold 197-a plans into the city's planning and policy decisions. In practice, these plans often go through the public review process, are adopted by the City Planning Commission and the City Council, but ultimately have little impact on what actually gets developed in the neighborhood. Although the current administration² has demonstrated a commitment to public participation that far exceeds previous administrations; there is no official provision for funding the recommendations made in 197-a plans. Follow-up actions are rarely more than Department of City Planning rezoning actions. Despite the existence of adopted 197-a plans as well as other neighborhood-based plans, market forces continue to spur much of the city's large-scale development. For example:

¹The 1975 Charter introduced the possibility of officially-recognized community-initiated local planning under Section 197-a, denoting a significant departure from the comprehensive citywide master planning previously required under the Charter. Section 197-a provided a way for communities to create plans and apply policy to land use decisions, as opposed to always being in the position of merely responding to public and private development proposals.

²At the time of writing, the final year of Michael Bloomberg's 2001-2005 term.

- In Red Hook, Brooklyn, a 346,000 square foot waterfront IKEA store and 1,400-space parking lot has been approved for a site explicitly designated in the community’s 197-a plan (approved in 1996) for maritime and industrial use. Three buildings are presently being demolished despite their eligibility for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places and



Photos: Lisa Kersavage

New York Harbor’s only dry dock capable of accepting large tall ships is located on a site recommended for industrial maritime use in the Red Hook 197a plan. A thriving ship repair outfit will be displaced by a parking lot for IKEA.

the opinion of the Landmarks Preservation Commission that retention of these buildings “was considered as a way of recalling the maritime and commercial history of the project site.”³ With few of the plan’s objectives achieved, the community has been left with little alternative and voted in favor of this unplanned-for but job generating big box development. Graving Dock 2, an active maritime industrial

use on the site (supporting 100 jobs), will be displaced, and there is no permanent provision for water transport.

- In the low-rise, mixed-use waterfront neighborhoods of Greenpoint and Williamsburg in northern Brooklyn, the community board voted against the city’s proposed 180-block rezoning despite a nearly two-year-long effort by the Brooklyn Office of City Planning to shape the rezoning with the participation of the community. Ultimately, the community felt that the rezoning as proposed had fallen short of their vision, calling for 35-story apartment towers on the waterfront and virtually eliminating manufacturing areas in favor of residential development, while providing no guarantee for affordable housing.⁴ While the Department of City Planning should be commended for working with the local community board, the process did not result in a rezoning that residents perceived as accurately reflecting their planning objectives or capable of revitalizing the area without significant displacement of residents and businesses.
- On Manhattan’s West Side, the community expressed in a consensus-driven plan (submitted to Community Board 4 in 2000) its opposition to a proposed stadium and support for much-needed affordable housing. The City Council has amended the plan to provide for 25 percent affordable

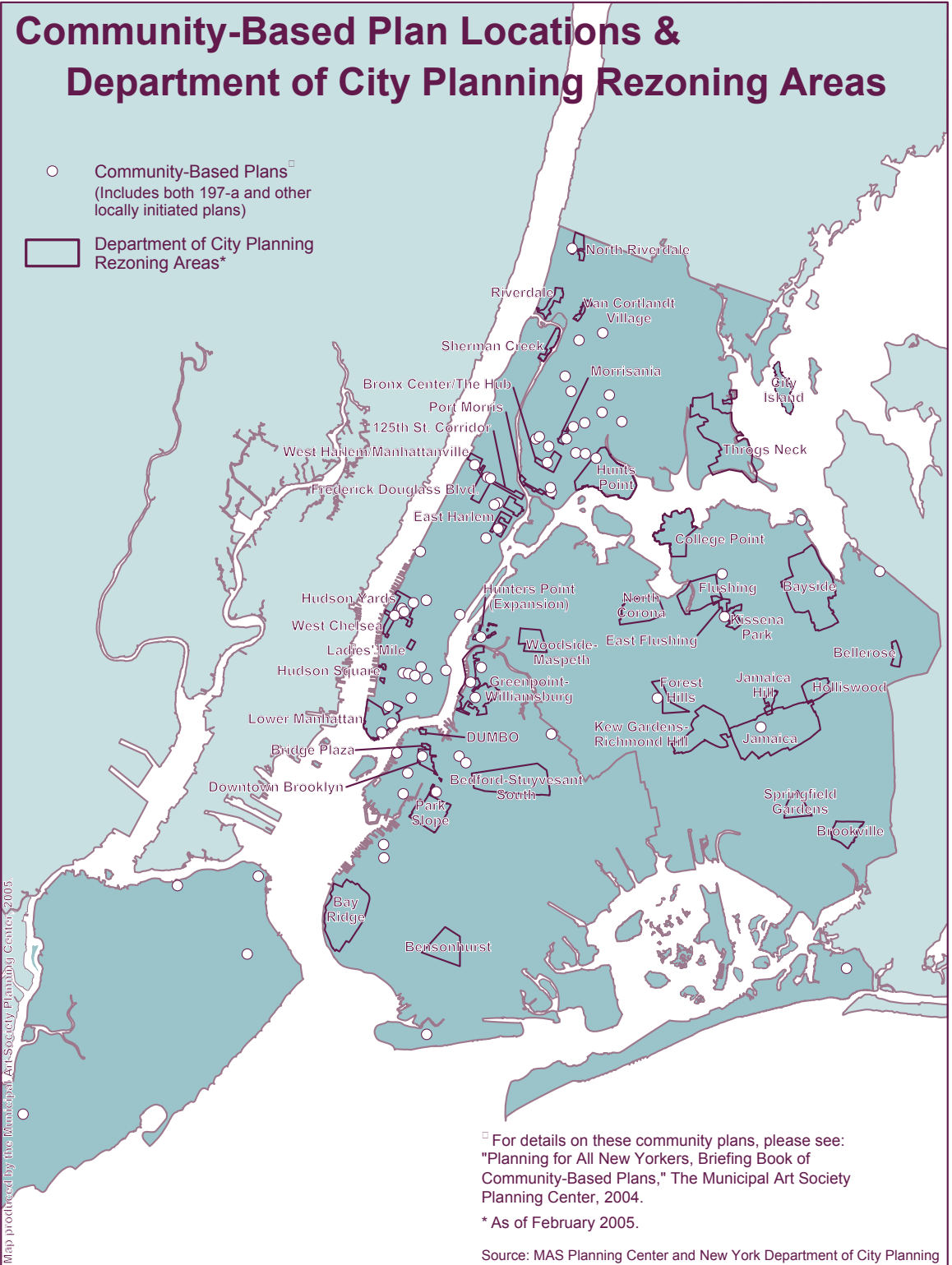
³ City Planning Commission Report Co30414 ZSK September 8th 2004, Calendar No.29.

⁴ The neighborhoods’ two adopted 197-a plans included recommendations to rezone their neighborhoods selectively and contextually to develop new affordable housing, encourage high-performing industry, and gain public access to the waterfront. The city adopted both plans in 2002.

Community-Based Plan Locations & Department of City Planning Rezoning Areas

○ Community-Based Plans
(Includes both 197-a and other locally initiated plans)

□ Department of City Planning Rezoning Areas*



Map produced by the Municipal Art Society Planning Center, 2005.

□ For details on these community plans, please see: "Planning for All New Yorkers, Briefing Book of Community-Based Plans," The Municipal Art Society Planning Center, 2004.

* As of February 2005.

Source: MAS Planning Center and New York Department of City Planning

housing, yet many of the community’s important concerns remain unaddressed—including the stadium.

Rather than seeing community-based plans as building blocks in developing public policy and a comprehensive city plan, city agencies have sometimes regarded community planning and city policy as separate—even conflicting—interests. When even those communities that have created 197-a plans feel compelled to file lawsuits against unwanted development, or generally perceive the city as unresponsive to their involvement in land use decisions, it is an indication that the current 197-a process is neither efficient nor effective. Communities get frustrated. There are costly delays in development. Faith in government erodes. Recently, city agencies have become more receptive to the idea of partnering with communities. For example, the Department of City Planning was instrumental in assisting Manhattan Community Board 9’s 197-a plan that will soon be submitted to the city. Capitalizing on efforts such as these, the city has a unique opportunity to adopt a new approach to planning that recognizes and values the ideas and contributions of ALL communities and ALL New Yorkers.

II. THE GOALS OF THE TASK FORCE

The Community-Based Planning Task Force is leading the effort to create a more meaningful role for communities in New York City’s planning and decision-making processes. Based on the premise that the people who live and work in a neighborhood are among the best-equipped to plan for the future of that neighborhood, the Task Force’s Campaign for Community-Based Planning is laying the groundwork for the formal adoption of community-based planning as official New York City policy.

Organized in 2000, the Task Force is a group of environmental justice advocates, professional planners, community board members, and academics. They were motivated to act after seeing, on the one hand, that in certain instances, plans devised by the city did not address neighborhood needs, and, on the other hand, that the creative, proactive plans being developed by communities for their neighborhoods lacked an effective mechanism for realization. In conjunction with the Municipal Art Society Planning Center, which has spent fifteen years providing direct technical assistance to communities, analyzing the 197-a process, and documenting communities’ struggles to benefit from 197-a plans, the Task Force is directing a campaign to ensure New Yorkers their right to engage in this basic civic process. The core elements of this initiative are to promote policies that build the capacity of communities to plan and to ensure that community-based plans are implemented and truly recognized as building blocks for the city’s comprehensive vision.

The Task Force aims to counter the perception that community-based planning initiatives consistently seek to halt development or promote a “NIMBY” (not in my backyard) mentality. In fact, the Task Force champions the importance of addressing local, citywide and regional needs with the principles of fair share, equity, environmental sustainability, and economic diversity. These ends can be achieved only through an equal partnership between the city and communities.

III. SUMMIT 2004: 100 COMMUNITY-BASED PLANNING ADVOCATES SHARE IDEAS

The collaborative process that grounds the work of the Task Force included an evening-long series of visioning workshops hosted by the Municipal Art Society in November 2004, entitled *Community-Based Planning in New York City: Summit 2004*.

The Task Force was joined by over 100 people who came together to discuss the state of community-based planning in New York City and to discuss strategies for increasing the role of communities in planning decisions and local governance. Although participants came from a wide range of organizations—as diverse as city agencies, developers, and environmental justice advocates—their conclusions about the obstacles to community-based planning and their ideas for increasing the ability of communities to plan by and large coincided with the issues and challenges identified by the Task Force.

Photo:Liz Laser



Participants in discussion at Community-Based Planning in New York City: Summit 2004.

IV. THE CHALLENGES

The first step toward establishing new policy is to examine the city’s existing planning framework in order to identify the nature and scope of the obstacles to effective, consensus-driven planning. These obstacles range from the abstract—misperceptions and lack of awareness—to the concrete—resources, training, and legislative measures, none of which are insurmountable. The “Solutions” section of the report offers ways to overcome the following obstacles:

Increase public awareness of community boards and community-based planning

Community boards are the grassroots level of government. Boards are also the gateway for the officially recognized community-based planning process through their role in the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP) and the 197-a process, and bear much responsibility for their districts’ interests.

Effective consensus-driven planning depends on the boards' representing the district and partnering effectively with local community-based organizations.

Yet the percentage of New Yorkers who do not know that community boards even exist is probably greater than the percentage of those who do. Some people avoid community boards until the board takes a stance that is perceived as contrary to neighborhood interests. Others may feel that the board will not embrace their interests, or that boards wield no true power in the political process. As a consequence, participation in development decisions and official planning efforts is rarely what it could be. Few people know that committee and board meetings are open to the public or that non-board members can serve on board committees. There is also the perception that community boards are not open to new immigrants and that membership requires close political connections. The means by which people discover community boards are few. There is no systematized, ongoing outreach campaign sponsored by the city. Public schools rarely make civic engagement or awareness of the local political process part of the curriculum. There are no public service announcements encouraging application for membership.

Encourage diversity and participation of underrepresented communities on community boards and in planning processes

Despite the amazing diversity of New York's population (an estimated 170 different languages are spoken here)⁵, there are no procedures or accountability standards to ensure or even to document guiding principles for achieving appropriate representation on community boards.

Accurate and up-to-date information on neighborhood demographics is critical for evaluating effective representation, targeting outreach and determining a balanced board membership. Each community district may contain several smaller "communities" or "neighborhoods," each with unique needs, skills, resources and demographics. Even though nearly one-third of New York City's population is foreign-born⁶, the city has not yet crafted the means to engage all New Yorkers in planning decisions. There is no systematized outreach to youth—in fact, budget cuts under the last administration eliminated the youth coordinators who had served this function. Each of the five boroughs of New York City has a different application form for new potential community board members, and no city agency is responsible for making sure that the pool of applicants is sufficiently diverse.



Photo:Liz Laser

Main Street in Flushing, Queens, a neighborhood with one of the highest concentrations of new immigrants in New York City.

⁵ The "Newest New Yorkers 2000," The Department of City Planning, 2005.

⁶ Ibid.

Open and transparent governance and planning efforts can bring disparate neighborhood groups together to hash out differences and understand common interests and goals. Consensus-driven planning is a way to increase public knowledge and awareness and to foster an understanding of democratic processes.

Increase training and technical resources for community boards and community-based organizations

The average community district has a population of over 100,000, which makes it comparable in size to Elizabeth, New Jersey, and Albany, New York. All board responsibilities are carried out by a very small staff typically consisting of the district manager and one or two administrative assistants. Any extra personnel, such as planners, must be paid from funds raised beyond the board's approximately \$200,000 annual budget—which also pays for all salaries, office supplies and equipment, printing, and mailing. In comparison, Albany's Division of Planning has an annual budget of \$369,996 and employs six full-time staff.⁷

In addition to their land use and service delivery roles, Charter changes made in 1989 explicitly gave boards the right to develop 197-a plans and the right to professional planning expertise. Community board members themselves contribute a variety of skills to planning efforts, but these skills vary from board to board. While the Charter authorizes community boards to hire planners, the city has never appropriated funds for community planners, and no community board currently employs a full-time planner.

As it now stands, standard training for community board members is six hours for their entire tenure. The Mayor's Community Assistance Unit, in partnership with borough presidents' offices, provides handbooks and minimal training for board members when they are first appointed. As a result, board members are sometimes unclear about their duties and responsibilities and over-reliant on district office staff. There is no refresher training and, no training in technology or communications. Community boards can request training on an ad hoc basis from the Department of City Planning, the Independent Budget Office, or borough presidents' offices, which in many cases do their best to provide some level of support, but this training is not standardized, required, nor considered to be an obligation. Non-profit organizations, graduate urban planning programs, and for-profit planning firms occasionally provide pro bono assistance, but this help is never guaranteed.

The lack of training of both community board members and district office staff is a major obstacle to public participation. Staff are consequently constrained in their effectiveness, and the perception of the board's ability, both by insiders

⁷Albany's Division of Planning is responsible for the administration and procedural requirements of the development approval process. In this capacity, the office functions as staff to the Board of Zoning Appeals, Planning Board, Historic Resources Commission, and Common Council.

and outsiders, is diminished. The pace at which the board can process budget, planning, and development decisions is slowed. There is very little guidance available on managing a community board office.

Make 197-a planning effective

Despite the 1989 Charter provisions for 197-a planning, only nine plans sponsored by community boards have been officially submitted to the city. Of these, only seven have been adopted by the City Planning Commission and the City Council.⁸ The obstacles to 197-a planning are many: training, funding, investment of time, lengthy city approval process, uncertain outcome, etc. Those engaged in 197-a planning often have high expectations for outcomes that are rarely met, while other people avoid getting involved because they feel the plan will have no impact or because they feel they do not have sufficient time or skills.

Plan preparation requires maps, data, planning expertise, outreach, and, in some cases, community organizing. Currently there is no systematic way or centralized clearinghouse from which communities can identify and obtain such resources. A 197-a plan can cost between \$50,000 and \$250,000 just

Photo:Liz Laser



Graduate Planning schools can be a resource for research, data collection and meetings. Here, students facilitate a workshop at Summit 2004.

to create, depending on the size of the area and the scope of the plan. Yet there is no collective pool or even reliable source of funding for community-based planning. Sometimes partial funding can be obtained from the local city council member or the borough president; other times from private foundations or grants, all of which require time and a bit of political skill or savvy to obtain. Community boards have the additional burden of having to establish a non-profit 501c(3) entity to receive funds from private sources.

Not all planning goals require the creation of a full 197-a plan. Smaller community-based plans, focused on a specific issue or a smaller geographic area, could form the basis for future plans and guide future decisions by the board. Less time-consuming and less costly, these smaller plans can convey a community's ideas more quickly. While not a substitute for a community plan, the Department of City Planning frequently undertakes rezoning studies and sponsors 197-c (rezoning) applications in collaboration with affected community organizations.

⁸ As of March 2005, adopted 197-a plans submitted by community boards are: Bronx CB3 (1992); Manhattan CB4 (1996); Brooklyn CB6 (1996); Manhattan CB6 (1997); Brooklyn CB1—Williamsburg Waterfront 197-A Plan (2002); Brooklyn CB1—Greenpoint 197-A Plan (2002); and Bronx CB8 (2003). Two 197-a plans submitted by community boards were not adopted: Manhattan CB2 - withdrawn (1996); and Queens CB 11 – disapproved (1999).

Identify and initiate the critical policy, legislative, and fiscal measures that support community-based planning in New York City

New York can draw on the experiences of a host of other municipalities in the United States to formulate new policy. The cities that have incorporated community-based planning into the official planning and budget framework—Seattle, Minneapolis, Houston, Baltimore, and Rochester, for example—generally begin with a set of guiding principles based on the concept that livable neighborhoods make a livable city. There is a commitment to broad community participation, development of collaborative partnerships, and strengthening of local capacities. Each city has a unique process, but there are underlying similarities:

- a link between neighborhood plans and a comprehensive city plan;
- explicit support from and partnership with city government;
- a clearly defined planning process;
- benchmarks and predictability of outcome; and,
- commitment to implementation.

New York City is arguably far more complex in its political organization and diverse in its neighborhoods than other U.S. cities, which may make the creation of a new planning framework more of an undertaking. Yet it is precisely for these reasons that a decentralized, predictable, and transparent planning process is in order. A new planning framework must also be able to accommodate calls for changes to city policy—addressing critical and growing needs for affordable housing, job creation, open space, and sustainability.

As it now stands, planning in New York City is heavily politicized, driven by market forces, and has in the last few decades taken place largely outside the public realm. The current administration has done a better job at conferring with communities about zoning decisions. But there is much more to be done before we can declare that New York City is balancing efficiency with equity and has embraced a new approach to planning.



View of the Manhattan skyline from a decaying pier in Greenpoint, Brooklyn.

Photos: Liz Laser



Participants in discussion at Community-Based Planning in New York City: Summit 2004.

V. THE SOLUTIONS

A new *framework* for community-based planning should be structured around two simple principles:

- ensure that opportunities to participate in consensus-driven planning are available to everyone;
- ensure that the tools, resources, training, and expertise to create and implement plans are developed and are available to everyone.

Community boards and community-based organizations are excellent starting points for building a new planning framework. The structure is in place, residents have amassed enormous collective knowledge, and there are opportunities to use local networks. Yet if community boards are to plan for their large and diverse constituencies, they must be truly inclusive, representative, and accountable. Their membership needs to reflect the diverse populations that live and work in their districts. They need to work closely with community-based organizations and support plans that are designed to equitably distribute burdens and benefits citywide.

Once the framing principles have been implemented, the city must also take steps to ensure that an effective planning *process* is in place. The process must be created according to the following principles:

- transform city agencies into local planning partners;
- define the planning process with benchmarks and ensure outcomes;
- ensure the implementation of community-based plans.

The steps required to enact these principles are multi-dimensional, spanning the function of agencies, the roles of elected officials, the city budget process, and possibly the city Charter. The following policy, legislative, and administrative changes will provide the local planning framework for community-based planning with resources and a predictable process.

Overarching, and critical to the success of an initiative that spans many aspects of government, is the support of the mayor. The mayor's leadership is critical and decisive in determining the budget and setting policy and priorities for the Department of City Planning and the city's operating agencies.

A. Policy change recommendations by agency

Community Assistance Unit (CAU)

The Community Assistance Unit, a part of the mayor's office, is responsible for coordinating the activities of city agencies with regard to the implementation and operation of the city Charter provisions concerning community boards and district service cabinets. During the current administration, CAU has

made considerable progress in improving its communication with community boards, allowing for regular meetings on issues of local concern as well as the administrative and technical needs of the boards. In conjunction with borough presidents, the CAU provides orientation and training for new community board members. This role could be made more efficient and effective. Here's how the mayor can expand the role of the CAU:

- Direct CAU to consult with community organizers on the design of methods and materials aimed at publicizing community boards and attracting members of underrepresented groups to join boards and committees.
- Call on CAU to develop a partnership with the Department of City Planning and the Department of Education to promote community board membership and planning curricula at public schools.⁹
- Ensure that CAU has the ability (either internally or in partnership with local community organizers, churches, mosques, etc.) to communicate in different languages and has knowledge of and access to all community-based organizations in the district.
- Direct CAU to conduct an annual media campaign about community board membership—utilizing community-based organizations, churches, television and radio public service announcements, subway and bus advertisements, and local newspapers, including the foreign language press.
- Direct CAU to coordinate with Con Edison, the Board of Elections, the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications, and other relevant sources to develop a comprehensive district mailing list of residents. These lists should be given to each board in electronic form and updated yearly.¹⁰
- Direct CAU to provide systematic annual training to all community board members and interested community members in government structure and process, technology and communications, planning, budgeting, and all areas of city service delivery.
- Make CAU responsible for coordinating with other city agencies and assisting in the preparation and circulation of a “tool kit” and manual to

Photo: Micaéla Birmingham



High school students in Bushwick, Brooklyn, provide GIS maps via projector during meetings of Community Board 4.

⁹ The model for such a partnership already exists—the Academy of Urban Planning in Bushwick, Brooklyn, for example, operates a program in which interns provide technology assistance at community board meetings.

¹⁰ This should also include an intensive local effort to contact residents who are not registered voters and who are not themselves on record with utility companies.

complement training.¹¹

- Engage CAU in the neighborhood planning process. Assign CAU staff to monitor the planning process to ensure that relevant city agencies confer with communities as they prepare and implement plans, both 197-a and other community-based plans.

Department of City Planning (DCP)

Included in the Charter responsibilities of DCP is the duty to provide community boards “with such staff assistance and other professional and technical assistance as may be necessary to permit such boards to perform their planning duties and responsibilities....” In more recent history, this mandate has often been narrowly defined and generally assumed to be satisfied by the presence of borough office planners whose work is divided geographically.

Under the current administration, DCP has demonstrated a significant commitment to engaging the community in the beginning phases of planning. In its study of planning options for Harlem’s 125th Street corridor, DCP began the effort by establishing a 100+ member advisory committee that has been involved at every stage and has opportunity to consult directly with each involved agency. DCP worked similarly on the Sherman Creek Initiative.

This new cooperative framework, however, is not used in all communities, and may survive only as long as the current administration holds office. To permanently transfer the benefits of this cooperative framework to community-based planning and to ensure that DCP also becomes a partner in plan implementation, more fundamental changes need to be made.

Here’s how to strengthen DCP’s ability to be an effective partner in community-based planning:

- Explore strategies that would enable community boards to benefit fully from the Charter provision for professional planning assistance such as expanding the role of DCP’s borough offices to establish a more formalized partnership between boards and DCP staff assigned to work with them; and ensuring that borough office staff are assigned to a manageable number of community districts to facilitate sufficient direct assistance.
- The agency’s recently released report, “The Newest New Yorkers 2000,” is a valuable analysis of the distribution, demographics, and socioeconomic characteristics of New York City’s foreign-born population that will be an asset to planners at both the citywide and community level. Study results (in tabular and map form), indicating trends in foreign-born population by

¹¹ A community-based planning “tool kit” should include curricula for land use training and GIS training, an up-to-date zoning guide, how-to guides on using tools and programs for neighborhood economic development and housing, a how-to guide for conducting visioning workshops and charrettes in diverse communities, and a directory of sources for assistance with community-based planning.

community district, should be distributed to all community boards.

- The city should consider community plans as building blocks for the development of citywide plans and strategies. DCP, in particular, should advocate for the integration of community plans with broader city policies and budget priorities, the Strategic Plan, the Consolidated Plan and other planning initiatives.
- Community boards should be included in pre-certification meetings with ULURP applicants in select instances to assess the new development proposal's adherence to the 197-a plan.
- DCP and the Department of Buildings should notify the community board whenever any new large-scale development (over 10,000 square feet, for example) is proposed, even as-of-right projects.

Department of Information Technology and Telecommunication (DOITT)

DOITT staff has the responsibility of making sure that the city uses existing and new technologies effectively. DOITT is also responsible for the 311 system. Here are ways in which DOITT can become a more effective planning partner:

- DOITT should conduct a needs assessment of a representative sampling of community boards in each borough to examine their technical needs and priorities. In doing so, DOITT could gain insights from and update the 2003 survey by the City Council Committee on Technology in Government on the technological capacity of community boards.¹²
- DOITT should provide IT staff to assist boards with evaluation, selection and operation of computers, communications technology and software (such as operating systems, word processing, GIS and database programs).
- DOITT should provide a standard web address to all community boards that utilizes the nyc.gov naming convention. A website template and hosting services should be made available for community boards unable to host their own websites.
- New intranet and internet applications offered by DOITT to community boards and the public should be tested in focus groups and research and development sessions with users and other community members before their implementation.
- DOITT should work with DCP to expand functionality of DOITT's Map Portal to allow for online queries and layering of planning-related GIS data such as existing and proposed zoning areas and PLUTO (Primary Land Use Tax Lot Output) data.

¹² For more information on the City Council survey, see Technology in Government Survey No. 1. "Technology Capacity at New York City's Community Boards," March 2003, The Select Committee on Technology in Government. Hon. Gale. A. Brewer, Chair.

- DOITT should continue its dialogue with community boards and the City Council Committee on Technology in Government to develop a plan and timeline for providing boards relevant 311 data geocoded by cross street (in a manner that does not compromise the identity of callers).
- DOITT should partner with non-profit organizations, vendors, and educational institutions that currently provide IT training and support to community-based organizations to develop a standardized, comprehensive technology training program and/or handbook for use by community boards and other community-based organizations.

Office of Management and Budget (OMB)

The OMB prepares the Mayor’s Preliminary and Executive Budgets and advises the mayor on the efficiency of city services. The OMB maintains an Office of Community Board Relations, which provides minimal annual training to new board members and additional training upon request. The OMB is generally responsible for assisting community boards throughout the budget year in the preparation of budgets, budget consultations with city agencies, public hearings on budgets, community board comments on the Mayor’s Preliminary and Executive Budgets, and preparation of capital and expense requests.

While there are many opportunities for boards to comment on how the city’s funds are spent, there is little opportunity for the public to decide how city funds are spent in their districts. The boards’ role is advisory only. The link between the city’s expenditures and the community districts’ needs is vague, and there is little accountability aside from the annual borough budget consultations. Boards’ roles can be strengthened by using 197-a plans as officially-recognized blueprints to guide the prioritization of budget items. A more definitive link among 197-a recommendations, capital and expense requests, the boards’ annual District Needs Statement, and the Mayor’s Budgets will demystify the complex budget process and allow greater access for people who want to be involved.

Here’s how OMB’s relationship to community boards can be transformed:

- Provide complete and accurate budget information to community boards by sharing all studies, evaluations, and analyses relevant to budget items under discussion with community boards.
- Provide training and support in drafting budgets for 197-a plans.
- Analyze agency budgets for compliance with 197-a recommendations.
- Monitor boards’ budget requests throughout the city’s budget process.

B. Policy Change by Elected Officials

Borough Presidents (BP)

The borough president is responsible for assuring that there is adequate

representation on community boards from the different neighborhoods within each community district. The BP must assess whether each board's composition accurately reflects all groups within the district. Community boards, civic groups, and other community groups and neighborhood associations may submit nominations to the borough president and to council members for consideration. The BPs play a critical role because they ultimately appoint all the board members and generally have close ties with the boards. BPs also have a natural connection to planning in that they are obliged by the Charter to maintain planning offices. There is much that BPs can do to overcome the current challenges to community-based planning:

- Submit a standardized annual report to the public advocate documenting the applications received for each board in his or her borough, the number of available seats on each board, and a profile of the composition of each community board.
- In coordination with City Council members, the DCP, and the CAU, demonstrate in an annual report that community boards accurately represent community districts. If representation is lacking, there should be a detailed description of the plan to rectify this deficiency. Oversight and accountability should rest with the public advocate.
- Working with CAU, study each community board to determine ways to increase participation in planning efforts and community board meetings. Explore whether provision of child care, transportation, meals, and varying meeting times and locations would encourage participation.
- Appoint people who are committed to community-based planning and neighborhood-level, proactive involvement in land use decisions.
- Require, monitor, and document committee attendance within all boards. Consider committee attendance (in addition to general meeting attendance) as a requirement for reappointment.
- BP planning offices, like DCP borough offices, are often already partners with community boards, supplying maps, data, information, land use training, and technical assistance to community planning efforts. BP offices can be expanded and formalized into technical assistance and training centers, dependent on sufficient funding and staffing.
- Make BP capital projects consistent with 197-a plans.
- Promote community board activities in newsletters and websites.

City Council Actions/Legislation

The role of the council in making the city's laws, approving the city's budget, and deciding on land use issues means that it can make enormous contributions to the effort to make community-based planning part of city policy. Here are steps that the council could take now:

- Approve only those candidates for city agency appointments who support community-based planning and commit themselves to sharing information and partnering with communities. This is important not just for the City Planning Commissioner and Commission and Board of Standards and Appeals appointees, but for all departments and public corporations and authorities, especially Parks, Sanitation, Transportation, Housing Preservation and Development, and the Economic Development Corporation.
- Provide oversight of city support for community-based planning and the 197-a process. The City Council’s Land Use Committee (or other committees, as appropriate) should hold oversight hearings to assess the current status of community-based plans and the planning process, and to give the public an opportunity to provide input.
- Require DCP to provide regular reports on relevant planning issues and the status of local plans.
- Conduct regular oversight hearings to monitor city agency responsiveness to community needs and enforcement of regulations.
- Track community plans and their recommendations and support their implementation through funding. When preparing the capital and expense budgets, include items from community plans. Based on an equitable distribution, commit funding for implementation through the city’s capital and expense budget process.¹³
- Promote community board activities in newsletters and websites.
- Guarantee that community plans are considered when the council takes land use actions. For all decisions, the Council should consider recommendations from community plans as public input in decision-making and should ensure that proposed projects are consistent with 197-a as well as other community plans.
- Devote a percentage of application fees (ULURP, variance requests, etc.) for an “intervenor” fund that would enable the community to access the information and expertise necessary to make an informed review.¹⁴
- Propose legislation and policy that respond to city-wide concerns addressed in community-based plans.¹⁵

¹³ New York should consider making certain that at least 1 percent of the city’s annual capital and expense budget allocations go toward expenditures identified in the recommendations of community-based plans.

¹⁴ New York State Article X siting guidelines for power-generating facilities includes a provision that part of an applicant’s filing fee is distributed to community groups for their use to fund an independent analysis of the proposal.

¹⁵ Many communities share common burdens such as solid waste facilities and power plants. Research by the MAS Planning Center from 2001-2004 has shown several common themes in community-based plans such as a need for open space, affordable housing, and economic development and concerns about transportation facilities and services.

- Revise the city’s rules for 197-a plans to require that the planning process be inclusive and reflect diversity within the community.

C. Mayoral Directive

In the many cities where community-based planning has been adopted as official policy, the city executive played a crucial role in reinventing government culture to make agency staff more responsive to working with communities, addressing community needs, and engaging communities as planning partners. Within New York’s “strong mayor” system, mayoral action is vital to the creation of a new approach to planning.

- Working with an advisory board of community-based groups and community boards, a task force from the Mayor’s Office should devise and implement standards and measures for the appointment of community board members throughout the five boroughs. Appointment criteria should be documented and publicized on the city’s website and community board websites and updated every two years. This advisory board should also develop a standardized application form, and maintain a composite profile of every community board in the city. The advisory board should have input from the Department of City Planning and the Office of Immigrant Affairs.
- Direct the chair of the City Planning Commission, the chair of the Board of Standards and Appeals, and the commissioner of the Community Assistance Unit, in consultation with commissioners of other agencies, to set a primary role for community-based planning and plans.
- Commit to working with community boards and organizations to create a plan for every community district in the city within five years.
- Sufficiently fund community boards to enable them to fulfill their Charter-mandated responsibilities.
- Explore ways to ensure that the 311 system relieves district office staff of day-to-day service delivery work and allows them to refocus on district planning.

VI. CREATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

A growing tradition of project-based partnering among city agencies, community groups, and civic and academic institutions has begun to produce creative results. HPD partnered with the Bushwick community to develop planning teams and employed visioning and charrette techniques to develop site plans for the Rheingold Brewery project. More recently, it initiated the same process for the redevelopment of the “Brig,” a one-square block former

Army prison in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. As mentioned on page 16, DCP formed a 100-member advisory group to initiate a planning process for 125th Street in Harlem and has established an interagency task force for the rezoning of the Sherman Creek area that has been effective in addressing community recommendations. These efforts are bringing community visions into the planning process at its earliest stages.

The city can continue to tap into the enormous network of non-profit and for-profit planning service providers, community-based organizations, planning schools, and civic organizations that work at the neighborhood level and have expertise in grassroots planning and organizing.

- The city, in partnership with the Community-Based Planning Task Force and non-profit civic organizations, should seek funding from private donors to establish a matching fund, that will allow communities to hire their own planning consultants. These funds would be matched by in-kind services provided by DCP and planners in other agencies.
- There are resources communities can avail themselves of to assist in planning efforts. Maps, data, GIS training, information on programs, best practice, and even limited technical assistance are available, but have not been made widely known to community boards by the city in any comprehensive fashion. The CAU, working with the Community-Based Planning Task Force, can become a clearinghouse for these resources, using its staff and website to publicize the information.
- The CAU can work with the Task Force to organize a curriculum on community-based planning that should be incorporated into required training for all new community board members.

VII. CONCLUSION

This report has presented myriad strategies to empower neighborhoods and the city to plan effectively for the future of New York. Many of these recommendations can be implemented quickly without a significant investment of resources; others will involve a more substantial reallocation of staff and funds. With a true commitment to community-based planning, incremental steps toward a new planning framework are possible despite the political cynicism and financial constraints that will always exist in a city as unique as New York.

The Task Force welcomes the opportunity to work with city agencies and elected officials in support of this goal. To stay involved or get more information, contact the Task Force via e-mail at planning@mas.org or call 212-935-3960.

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The MAS Planning Center was created to carry out the mission of the Municipal Art Society on the level of New York's diverse communities – neighborhood by neighborhood. Our goal is to promote and support community-based planning in low and moderate income communities in New York City.

The Municipal Art Society is a private, nonprofit, membership organization whose mission is to promote a more livable city. Since 1893, the Society has worked to enrich the culture, neighborhoods and physical design of New York City.