

Getting sustainability done in New York City

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Just in time for Earth Day, New York City has issued a new sustainability plan, one that focuses on means as well as ends. Like the initial plan issued by the Bloomberg administration in 2007, the Adams plan is grounded in reality and is both aspirational and operational. Its strategy is to deploy the resources of the Inflation Reduction Act, federal infrastructure funds, and the \$4 billion New York State Environmental Bond Act to accelerate New York's transition to a sustainable city.

The plan includes a focus on protection from climate threats, such as extreme weather, and assistance to building owners as they decarbonize their buildings. It connects protection of environmental quality via investments in [green space](#) and clean water to quality of life, and includes enhancements to our transportation system and recycling of food waste. The plan emphasizes what it terms the "green economic engine" and highlights the business and employment opportunities of the green economy.

The first of the plan's nine guiding principles focuses on pragmatic action. According to the plan, the city must:

"Act with urgency and focus on implementation. The policymaking and legislation of the last 16 years has left a significant amount of work on the table. In some cases, this is by design, knowing that projects can take decades; in other cases, it is due to pandemic-related delays or the unimagined complexity of implementing groundbreaking climate laws and policies. This plan prioritizes implementation and getting [sustainability](#) done."

The final two of the plan's nine guiding principles highlight the need to transform the city government itself, to facilitate the transition to sustainability. The eighth of the plan's nine guiding principles is an effort to change New York's horrific and intensely bureaucratic budget process. It advocates implementing:

"...climate budgeting to align City resources with sustainability and resilience goals to ensure that we remain focused on prioritizing climate change and environmental justice in our investments and decision-making, New York City will be one of the first global cities, and the first major city in America, to launch a Climate Budgeting initiative."

"Climate budgeting is a process that incorporates science-based climate

considerations into the City's budget decision-making process by evaluating how actions and spending today contribute to meeting longer-term climate targets. The process will allow us to understand the climate impact of the dollars we spend, identify where more investment is needed, and champion forward looking investments."

New York's government is a large and unwieldy machine, and under climate budgeting, it would be directed to identify and analyze the environmental impacts of the government's actions. This would vastly increase the impact of the sustainability plan's specifically environmental investments. The final of the plan's nine guiding principles is to streamline the procurement process—currently an absolute nightmare for anyone trying to rely on city action to do anything at all. According to the plan, its ninth guiding principle is to:

"Streamline the City's procurement processes to expedite project delivery Identifying process inefficiencies can help the City become nimbler and better able to deploy resources where and when they are most needed. In addition to the Capital Process Reform Task Force recommendations, Get Stuff Built: A Report of the Building and Land Use Approval Streamlining Task Force was released in 2022 and identified 111 ways the development process is broken, accompanied by recommendations for solutions that simplify and shorten the review and approval of new projects. By improving contracting and procurement efficiency and the way we implement public projects, our City's response to climate change will be expedited. The City is committed to improving contract and procurement processes—including looking at ways to undertake the most efficient structures—to implement our projects."

New York City's budget, human resources, and procurement policies are a nightmare of complexity, bureaucracy, and inertia. It's amazing that anything gets done at all in the face of these arcane and outdated rules

and procedures. I'll provide a personal example: Since the pandemic started, I've had the opportunity to view two badly needed construction projects in Morningside Park, the site of a walk that my wife and I enjoy most mornings.

The first was the reconstruction of basketball courts and a playground just south of 120th Street on the east side of the park, and the second is the still-ongoing effort to pave some walkways on the southern end of the park. Construction features long periods of inactivity punctuated by sudden bursts of action followed by additional long periods of inactivity.

The absence of efficient coordination of the work is obvious; if this is how long it takes to do simple stuff, I shudder at the thought of contracting something as complicated as a motor vehicle charging station. The sustainability plan's focus on budgeting and contracting is noteworthy and important if the city government is to facilitate rather than impede the transition to a sustainable city.

The plan makes the important point that many of the building blocks are in place for a more sustainable New York City. The state's Public Service Commission, the regulator of New York's energy system, is headed by Rory Christian, a dedicated and highly capable sustainability professional with deep experience in renewable energy, energy efficiency, and environmental justice.

New York City's entire environmental effort is led by Rohit Aggarwala, another talented and seasoned sustainability professional who built the city's first sustainability office under Mike Bloomberg and led the development of the city's first sustainability plan: PLANYC2030. In addition to superb leadership, there are federal, state, and local resources and federal, state, and local mandates to decarbonize the city's buildings and [energy system](#) and move New York toward renewable energy.

The plan recognizes these resources and is now focused on "getting stuff done." We've had plenty of words and symbolic gestures (Mayor DeBlasio's particular specialty); it's now time to emphasize deeds.

The plan is rich in detailed proposed actions for each goal. The actions are clear, feasible, and often depicted both visually and in text. There are examples, profiles, and case studies, all presented to demonstrate the feasibility and appeal of each proposal. Highlighted throughout the plan are pictures of everyday New Yorkers working to make our city more sustainable and enjoying the benefits of this city. These case studies and profiles communicate the city's diversity and the tangible benefits of a sustainable New York.

I am also encouraged by the plan's understanding of the business opportunities presented by the transition to a green economy. Government can build infrastructure, as well as formulate and implement policy, but most of the real work of urban sustainability will be undertaken by the private sector. Sometimes the [private sector](#)'s role will be to serve as government contractors, but more often private businesses will be responding to market forces and taking advantage of business opportunities presented by the transition that is now underway.

Many of New York City's business leaders understand the opportunities that are emerging. This past Friday, I had the honor of opening Columbia University's Sustainability Management Student Association's (SUMASA) Annual Sustainability Symposium featuring our students, faculty, alums, and an impressive array of sustainability professionals. Many conference speakers were local business entrepreneurs who are already participating in the city's green economy.

Earlier in the week, we sponsored an event to introduce my new book on the transition to environmental sustainability, and a [large crowd](#) assembled in Low Rotunda (an iconic public space at Columbia

University) to hear about the progress we are already making toward a green economy. The energy and enthusiasm of our students and sustainability colleagues was present all week and during Earth Day—and is also present in the [city](#)'s impressive new sustainability plan.

All of this fuels my optimism that we can address the issues of environmental sustainability and that New York City will help lead the way by providing a model for other large cities in America and throughout the world. Mayor Adams deserves enormous credit for empowering his team to develop and issue this plan and for deploying his political capital in support of practical, real-world-oriented sustainability planning, policy, programs, and management. New Yorkers are pragmatic realists, and I believe they will respond positively to a plan to "get stuff done."

More information: Full plan: [s-media.nyc.gov/agencies/mocej...
2023-Full-Report.pdf](https://s-media.nyc.gov/agencies/mocej/2023-Full-Report.pdf)

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