

# The reality of the transition to an environmentally sustainable economy in New York City

October 30 2023, by Steve Cohen

---



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Economic transitions take time but do take place. New York City first became prominent as a trading city, with America's resources and farm goods delivered via the Erie Canal shipped out of the port of New York. Then, we became a manufacturing city, at one time making nearly all the

clothing worn in America. Today, we are a center of finance, communication, fashion design, entertainment, the arts, health care, research, and education.

We are no longer a shipping port or a center of manufacturing but a global capital. Slowly but certainly, we are on the path to [environmental sustainability](#). Along with New York state, we have ambitious carbon reduction goals, and our utilities are struggling to make our [energy grid](#) more renewable and our energy system more efficient and reliable. The path is not direct since inflation, mismanagement, NIMBY, and pandemics are upending some of our plans.

But not all of them. Local Law 97 requires large buildings over 25,000 feet to reduce their carbon emissions by 40% by 2030 and 80% by 2040. Most of New York City's large buildings are moving toward compliance, and only 10% have done nothing.

The City's Department of Buildings held a hearing in late October to hear comments on the rules envisioned for enforcing the law and to present the operational definition of "good faith compliance" required by building owners to demonstrate they are working toward adhering to the law. If compliance requires raising housing costs for people on low or fixed incomes, we could be paying for carbon reduction with homelessness.

These realities of the transition must be understood, and we should allow for exceptions or the development of subsidies. We must understand the trade-off choices we are making and not turn [poor people](#) or the elderly into victims of the sustainability transition.

Energy and climate change may be the lead story, but it's not the only story. Since 2013, large food companies and restaurants have been required to separate and recycle their [food waste](#). Today, people living in

Brooklyn and Queens are required to recycle their food waste. Curbside pick up of food waste will be expanded from Brooklyn and Queens to Staten Island and the Bronx on March 25, 2024, and to Manhattan on October 7, 2024.

At that point, food recycling will be required city-wide. This waste will be converted into gas and fertilizer via anaerobic digestion or directly into fertilizer via composting. It also won't end up in landfills leaching toxics into groundwater and methane into the atmosphere.

And despite the shameful pandering of New Jersey's Governor Murphy and less prominent but equally obtuse politicians, [congestion pricing](#) is at long last arriving in New York City's Central Business district. Freight and cars will now be able to move along the streets more rapidly—polluting less and saving billions of dollars in lost productivity—and an extra billion dollars a year will be available to subsidize and improve mass transit.

Lots of time and energy have been wasted on fears of unanticipated impacts from congestion pricing that will never materialize. My new favorite is that trucks will avoid passing through Manhattan to avoid the tolls. The cost of trucks sitting in Manhattan gridlock today dwarfs the cost of the tolls that are envisioned for the future. The reduction in travel time will be well worth the toll. Moreover, by improving mass transit, we make the city more energy-efficient and environmentally sustainable.

This past April, New York City updated the city's sustainability plan with a comprehensive plan entitled: [PLANYC: Getting Sustainability Done](#). New York City is a worldwide leader in the generations-long transition to urban environmental sustainability. The updated plan includes 32 initiatives ranging from achieving a 30% tree canopy cover to pursuing fossil fuel-free city operations, from assisting city building owners with solar installation and other clean energy projects to

developing new markets for recycling.

These initiatives will be implemented [by over 50 practical, operational actions](#), largely within the control of city government, such as: expanding the tree risk management program, installing heat pumps in 10,000 NYCHA apartments, phasing out city investment in fossil fuel equipment, and "[e]valuat[ing] all City roofs undergoing [repair work](#) for climate infrastructure installation by 2025...Install[ing] solar energy, electric building infrastructure, green roofs, or other [renewable energy](#) on all viable City-owned property by 2035."

The plan is ambitious and visionary and attempts to imbed environmental sustainability in multiple operations of the city's routine governmental program. While I would be impressed if half of what is outlined is achieved as planned, whatever is accomplished will be important steps in the right direction.

New York City government is a huge and unwieldy operation subjected to multiple cross pressures and led by a mayor who is far more political than managerial. And "getting sustainability done" would be a huge challenge even for a mayor who was a genius at management.

Nevertheless, the direction, intent, and accomplishments of the city's government are significant elements of NYC's transition to environmental sustainability. Fortunately for New Yorkers, the city and state governments are not going at this alone.

The use of renewable energy and the adoption of electric vehicles is growing in New York City. For one hour in [May 2023](#), 20% of New York State's electrical demands were met by solar power. Typically, over 25% of our electricity is drawn from hydropower.

The city's major nonprofit and private sector institutions see the need for

environmental sustainability and, like the city government, are looking for practical operational opportunities to move us toward a circular economy. Brooklyn-based Revel, (whose CEO, Frank Reig, is a graduate of the MPA in Environmental Science and Policy program I direct at Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs) is an electric vehicle innovator with electric ride shares, mopeds, and high-speed charging hubs with 40 chargers in two Brooklyn locations with plans to expand [city](#)-wide in 2024. Their bright blue ride-share Teslas and mopeds are hard to miss in my neighborhood.

There are business opportunities in the transition to environmental sustainability, and many talented young entrepreneurs like Frank Reig are reaching for those opportunities. As long as I'm highlighting alums, I should mention that Jeff Prosserman, a graduate of Columbia's Sustainability Management Master's program, has founded a company called Voltpost, which is installing charging stations built into urban streetlamps. Other young people are dreaming and studying in universities all over the world and getting ready to turn their sustainability ideals into operational realities.

But it is not only government, entrepreneurs, and individuals who are moving New York forward. New York's major institutions—its cultural landmarks, universities, hospitals, and many private businesses—are exploring ways to decarbonize and recycle. Columbia University and many other institutions are working to reduce waste and greenhouse gas pollution and slowly starting to invest in power systems and infrastructure to reduce their environmental impact. Here at Columbia, we are in the midst of a transition to electric vehicles including busses, maintenance vehicles, and even the President's personal vehicle (a shiny red Tesla parked by the President's House).

The reality is that our culture is changing. Environmental impact has gone from the fringes to the center of our consciousness. When I started

working in environmental policy back in 1975, few people cared about environmental quality. And people making decisions about energy, waste, manufacturing, and transportation rarely, if ever, factored environmental impacts into their decision-making. Today, it is routine for people in organizations to ask about environment and sustainability when they design products or services.

It is not that every decision is dominated by environmental considerations, but fewer and fewer decision-makers ignore environmental impacts. That is a sea change, and it is the best guarantee that the transition that's begun will continue until it is completed. The pace may be slow, but it's steady—and I've heard that's what wins the race.

*This story is republished courtesy of Earth Institute, Columbia University*  
<http://blogs.ei.columbia.edu>.

Provided by State of the Planet

Citation: The reality of the transition to an environmentally sustainable economy in New York City (2023, October 30) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-10-reality-transition-environmentally-sustainable-economy.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--