

# 1. Executive Summary

**T**he New York-Connecticut region, an area that includes New York City, Long Island, the lower Hudson Valley, and coastal Connecticut, is one of the largest and most complex urban areas in the United States. A part of the larger tri-state metropolitan area surrounding New York City, it is home to 14 million people and a productive, energy-efficient economy built around the nation's most robust transit network. The region also includes some of the wealthiest and poorest communities in the country, and is one of its most racially and ethnically segregated regions. As a coastal region, it is also increasingly vulnerable to sea level rise and frequent and intense storms brought on by climate change.

Three years of collaborative planning by the New York-Connecticut Sustainable Communities Consortium, a partnership of nine cities, two counties and six regional planning organizations, has resulted in an agenda to create more sustainable and equitable economic growth. The components of this agenda include plans to create more jobs and mixed-income housing in specific downtown locations and low-income neighborhoods served by the MTA Metro-North Railroad and the MTA Long Island Rail Road. It also proposes improvements to the planning processes that often fail to adequately connect transportation, housing, economic development and environmental planning and policies. And it includes actions to promote fair access to good schools, job opportunities and healthy communities.

The work of the Consortium was supported by a Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant, a key initiative of the Partnership for Sustainable Communities, a federal partnership of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the U.S. Department of Transportation, and the Environmental Protection Agency.

The Consortium's planning program was built from a shared vision of its members – derived from their own planning efforts individually -- for sustainable development in the New York-Connecticut planning area. This shared vision for sustainable development rests on the following key characteristics of the

Consortium's planning area:

- A globally competitive regional economy that will require strategic investment in infrastructure, business centers and neighborhoods to maintain and expand prosperity and improve quality of life.
- A low per capita energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, largely a result of safe and reliable public transit service providing for more compact and efficient land-use patterns. These services not only dramatically reduce a traveler's carbon footprint, but also facilitate a larger shift away from automobile use.
- Transit systems with rich legacies and great scalability that have received and will require sustained investment.
- A network of downtowns and neighborhoods supported by the transit network with underutilized potential to provide needed housing and jobs.

Given these key characteristics, pursuit of the shared vision through the Consortium's planning program has involved its members working together to foster livable and sustainable communities and growth centers around existing and planned transit services in the New York-Connecticut planning area in order to enhance affordable housing and continue to reduce traffic congestion, improve the environment and expand economic opportunities. Underlying this is the understanding that transit oriented development (TOD) is a foundation for sustainable and equitable development. TOD, when correctly planned, designed and implemented, provides economic benefits (lower transportation costs, access to job centers), social benefits (public space, mixed-income housing, community resources), environmental benefits (lower per capita energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions), health benefits (increased walking, lower obesity) and greater convenience in using transportation services. TOD planning is well

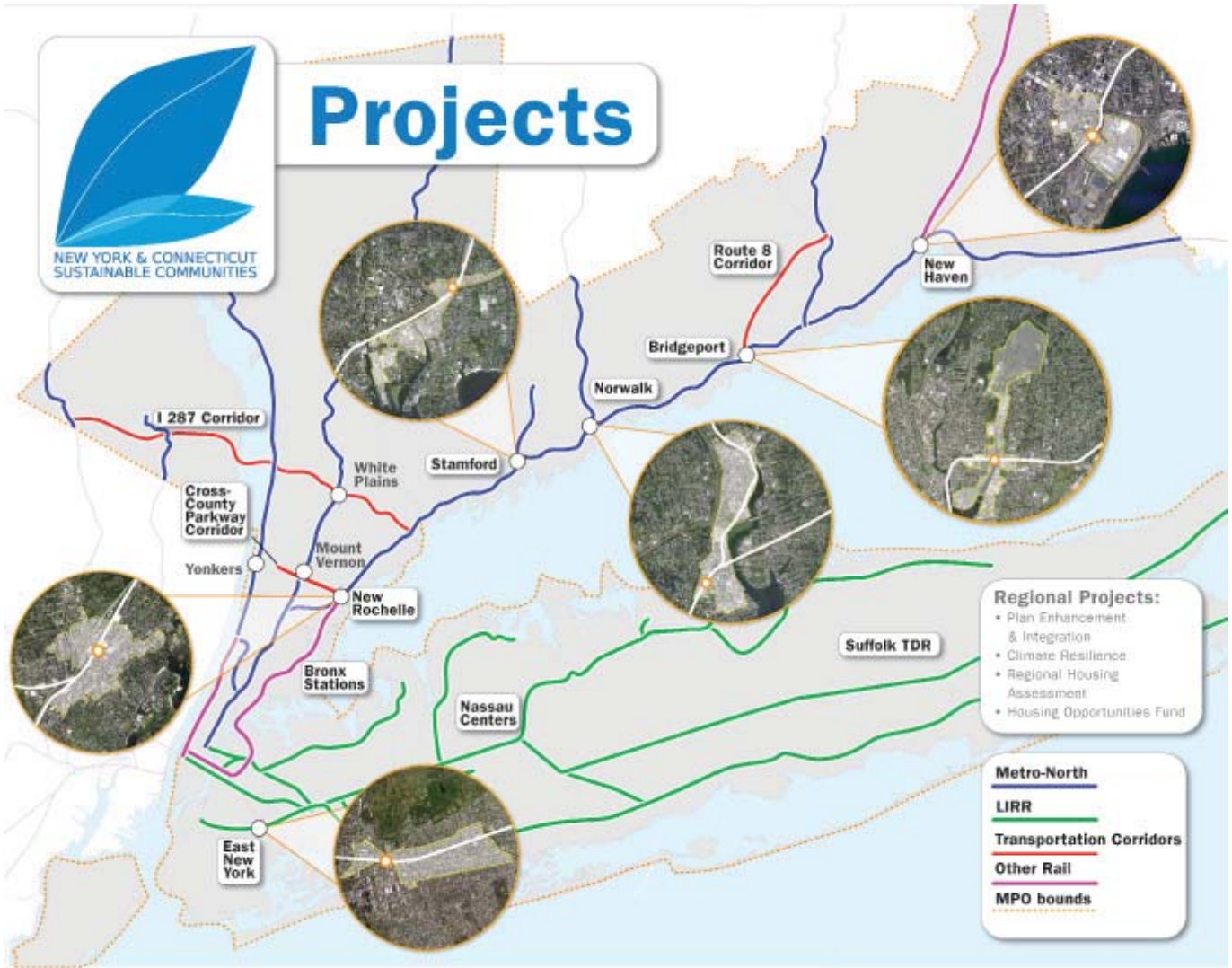
established in the New York-Connecticut region, and the planning initiative sought to both capitalize on current and earlier efforts as well as to place TOD planning in a more regional context.

Specifically, the Consortium pursued three objectives to further progress toward this vision:

- Integrating and enhancing existing regional and local planning to the greatest extent practical to fill in gaps and more closely align the Consortium members' planning work with the six Livability Principles defined by the federal Partnership for Sustainable Communities to 1) provide more transportation choices, 2) promote equitable, affordable housing, 3) enhance economic competitiveness, 4) support existing communities, 5) coordinate policies and leverage investment, and 6) value communities and neighborhoods.
- Linking strategies on a regional scale to develop mixed-income housing, employment and infrastructure in locations connected by the two major commuter rail networks in the planning area – the MTA Metro-North Railroad and the MTA Long Island Rail Road.
- Supporting project planning at the local level that reflects the overall Consortium vision while engaging residents and stakeholders in developing implementation strategies.

By pursuing these objectives, the Consortium members sought to bring their individual regional and local planning efforts into greater alignment while also enhancing that planning to create a more robust approach to regional sustainability. At the same time, the shared regional vision was reflected locally through place-based projects funded through the Consortium planning program.





New York - Connecticut Sustainable Communities Consortium Regional and Place-Based Projects

transit-oriented growth in the county's downtowns.

## a. Outcomes of Place-Based Projects

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**A** primary goal of the planning initiative was the development of sustainable, equitable communities by creating a network of mixed-use, mixed-income centers linked by the region's extensive commuter rail network. Doing so will build upon the key strengths of the planning area, thus enhancing efficiency in the face of future growth, as well as mitigating environmental pollution, conserving land and strengthening economic vitality.

The most tangible legacy of the initiative is the set of project plans for specific locations that can provide a new dimension of growth for the region's economy and models for other locations. Several of these projects developed community plans for places as diverse as the South Bronx and central Nassau County. Some assessed the feasibility and potential impacts of major infrastructure improvements. Others addressed key sustainability and development issues that affect several communities in a jurisdiction. These projects are described in Section 2.b of this report and when implemented produce would bring a wide range of benefits.

In **Connecticut**, new transit services, station redevelopment and pedestrian improvements would support comprehensive downtown and neighborhood revitalization strategies in Stamford, Norwalk, Bridgeport and New Haven.

In the **lower Hudson Valley**, downtown transit-oriented development and transportation-land use coordination along the Cross-County and I-287 corridors would build on existing plans for the cities of New Rochelle, Yonkers, Mt. Vernon and White Plains.

In **New York City**, community-based plans for East New York and eight communities in the Bronx would expand mixed-income housing and job opportunities while improving livability, and waterfront communities would more effectively adapt to the risks of storms and rising sea levels.

On **Long Island**, new infill development and pedestrian improvements in Valley Stream, Lynbrook and Baldwin would support transit-supported growth in Nassau, while improvements in Suffolk County's 17 transfer-of-development rights programs would both protect environmentally sensitive areas and support



## b. Findings and Actions to Improve the Regional Planning Process for Sustainable Development

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**S**pecific gaps were identified between the sustainability-related elements of existing planning processes and requirements at various levels – local, county/regional planning organization (RPO), regional/metropolitan planning organization (MPO), and state – that are distinct impediments to realizing the Consortium’s shared sustainable development vision. The assessment is based on an analysis of regional, county and municipal plans that identified commonalities, differences, overlaps and alignment with the Livability Principles promulgated by the federal Partnership for Sustainable Communities.

Gaps in the transportation planning process exist primarily between planning and resource allocation between the two states (as well as with New Jersey), and between the planning at the regional and local level in New York. Overall, these gaps are due to the allocation processes, usually based on complex formulas, which bring federal and state resources to MPOs, local municipalities and local transit providers.

A fundamental tension pervades land use planning in New York and Connecticut. Each town, village or city has the authority to approve, disapprove or modify land use planning and zoning, yet county, regional and state planning departments are also required to review and make recommendations on those projects that could have inter-municipal impacts.

Housing, economic development and transportation planning often takes place in isolation of each other, making comprehensive transit-oriented development planning difficult. The regional transit network is a key part of the Consortium’s vision to improve access to opportunity and an increase in transportation options is a key objective identified by the Consortium. The involvement of regional transit providers during initial planning stages of TOD projects is vital. Combining land use and transit planning from the outset helps to identify creative financing opportunities and address any potential obstacles. Several project recommendations in the Implementation Plan require the continued

collaboration of transit planners, service providers, municipal planners and community stakeholders throughout the planning process.

A number of initiatives are underway in New York and Connecticut to reduce energy use and corresponding greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. However, additional steps are needed to make the current approach more comprehensive and to increase overall impact while properly maintaining existing transit services and facilities.

More effective resiliency planning will require a greater integration of hazard mitigation and resiliency plans with all other identified plans at multiple levels.

Actions to improve coordination and effectiveness of planning across multiple levels of government and different programmatic responsibilities could take a number of forms, from voluntary collaboration to regulatory reform. Steps which would flow from the work of the NY-CT Sustainable Communities Consortium as well as the objectives of the federal Partnership for Sustainable Communities include the following:

- Establish a voluntary Regional Sustainable Communities Network (RSC Network) drawn from both government agencies and non-governmental stakeholders to facilitate continued collaboration and act as a clearinghouse for information and best practices.
- Pursue changes in federal planning regulations, as described in Section 4 of this report, which will better coordinate the disparate elements of sustainability planning through various forms of cross-acceptance and other means.
- Develop multi-state planning mechanisms to foster more regional sustainable development planning.
- Develop spatially-specific approaches to assist in implementing projects for transportation corridors, transit-oriented development zones and multi-jurisdictional projects.

## c. Findings and Actions to Address Regional Equity and Opportunity

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**W**ith the recognition that regional equity and opportunity is a key component of sustainability, the federal Partnership for Sustainable Communities required the Consortium and all recipients of Sustainable Communities Regional Planning grants to undertake a fair housing and equity assessment. The development of new housing, jobs and infrastructure in the region must take into account patterns and impacts of segregation, which in large measure are the result of a history of public policies at all levels of government, from federal mortgage policies to state infrastructure investments to local zoning. The assessment found patterns and impacts of racial and ethnic segregation in the region that are important for policies guiding new infrastructure and development decisions.

Racial and ethnic integration is associated with several benefits, including stronger economic growth, greater economic opportunity, better education outcomes, and more efficient use of land and other resources. For example, U.S. metropolitan regions that were more integrated by both race and skill levels had stronger economic growth from 1980-2005.

While the region is becoming more diverse and 54% on the population is non-white, it is also one of the most highly segregated large metropolitan areas in the country. The region's population is significantly bifurcated, with the largest shares of the population living in either white, low-poverty communities or non-white high-poverty communities. Access sources of opportunity, such as high-achieving schools, are sharply divided with poor and non-white communities having far fewer of these assets.

There is little multi-family, low-rent or subsidized housing in white, low-poverty areas, with restrictive local zoning a primary cause. This is compounded by limited tools to challenge or incentivize reform to zoning and other practices that are excluding lower-income families and by a general lack of resources to support the development of extremely-low income housing. And with limited investment in fair housing testing and enforcement, discriminatory practices of real estate agents, sellers and landlords, lenders, and

others are left invisible and unchallenged.

Multi-racial neighborhoods offer better access to opportunity than segregated, non-white neighborhoods, but many of these neighborhoods appear to be undergoing substantial demographic and economic change, raising questions about their stability and the impacts of rising rents on low-income residents.

Strategies to address these conditions were developed by a Fair Housing and Equity Assessment Advisory Committee consisting of fair housing practitioners, community development practitioners, for-profit and not-for-profit housing developers, organizations representing low-income communities and communities of color and community foundations. Specific recommendations were developed by the Advisory Committee for the following strategies:

- Strengthen the anti-discrimination investigation and enforcement system
- Enhance the engagement of low-income people and underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities in local and regional planning
- Promote investment in and revitalization of Racially/Ethnically Concentrated Areas of Poverty (R/ECAPs) and high-poverty communities while protecting against displacement
- Promote new affordable housing in high-opportunity areas
- Ensure that underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities, low-income families, and other protected groups have access to affordable housing in high-opportunity areas
- Stabilize housing opportunities for middle and moderate-income families
- Advance regional approaches to affordable housing
- Ensure regional infrastructure planning and investments incorporate equity considerations

The Advisory Committee's discussions, report and recommendations informed the consortium's deliberations and the actions it proposes, which can be found in Section 4, "Implementing the Regional Sustainable Development Vision."

## d. Findings and Actions to Improve Implementing Sustainable Transit-Oriented Development

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- Funding is necessary for infrastructure projects as well as housing and commercial development. In particular, funding gaps exist for work necessary to develop local zoning revisions, for the development of housing across a broad spectrum of income levels, and for new flood-prevention infrastructure and maintenance of existing infrastructure to improve resiliency to storms and flooding.

The place-based projects developed by the Consortium are positioned for implementation, and will leverage other investments and larger redevelopment plans. However, several common themes emerged with regard to barriers faced by these as well as similar projects. Challenges to implementation often involve uncertainty over best practices, difficulties developing community consensus around development goals, a lack of pedestrian and transit services between transit nodes and other destinations, uncertainties of project costs and timing, and a lack of funding for planning, infrastructure investments, affordable housing and climate resiliency.

A number of actions that would help to overcome these implementation barriers:

- Federal, state, and local partnerships should develop resources critical to decisions made about parking requirements, flood policies, and housing design
- Local projects will benefit from expanded and continuous public participation in planning decisions made at the local, regional, and state levels that impact funding and policy decisions on-the-ground.
- Reduction in parking ratios required by municipalities would make projects less costly and could be used to expand the amount of affordable housing.
- Additional funding or more flexible funding is needed to expand the coverage and frequency of transit and pursue last-mile solutions, particularly in suburban settings.
- A continued commitment to resource sharing and participation, as discussed above should also be accompanied by a simplification of application and use requirements for available funding programs at the state and federal level.