



Sustainable New York...by 2030?

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Mayor Bloomberg took another step in building his sustainability plan for NYC last week as he delivered an address to city leaders at the Queens Museum. Streetsblog has a good summary of the press accounts of the speech [here](#).

There are many very good and far reaching proposals, such as reducing NYC's greenhouse gas emissions by 30%, increasing parkland, upgrading NYC's aging infrastructure and building new housing on brownfields near transit. He was also downright dour about the consequences of inaction, saying that we risk a breakdown in basic systems that keep the city functioning and a deteriorating quality of life for its residents if we don't act NOW.

This is exactly what I and many other people have dreamed about for quite some time. It's a little overwhelming to consider how well this could be done and worry greatly about how badly this could be botched.

Bloomberg also says that he will be engaging in a serious period of listening to what the people recommend on making the city more sustainable. So what advice would us Oil Drummers give to Mayor?

I've often thought about their being two paths to building a sustainable New York: Big Bang or incremental. It's the sort of debate that urban planners have about Robert Moses v. Jane Jacobs. But that Mayor seems to be taking a nice middle path. He has a vision of the whole system and what's possible, but he also understands that many of the solutions will come from the bottom up.

One major issue that the mayor will quickly run into is that many of the easy proposed fixes to infrastructure, improving mass transit, building thousands of Green Building, etc will cost Billions of dollars that the city does not have. Our public debt has already increased dramatically under Bloomberg's tenure and there is little additional money available from the MTA or Port Authority. However, changing the patterns of current and future expenditures will have an impact over time. Moreover, changing tax incentives can leverage much larger resources in the private sector.

But perhaps the largest source of power to make New York more sustainable is political will to stand up to special interests that will fight major reform efforts toward sustainability. They will either try to defeat or seriously compromise the efforts that would make New York more sustainable. By bundling many of the easy wins like "More parkland and playgrounds" with something more controversial, like "less free on-street parking" on the many diverse issues that impact sustainability, the Mayor might be able to enact the plan within the three years he has left in office.

The City Council is very "green minded" at this point too. Many of them want to have something concrete accomplished before the next election or to use as a platform to run for higher office

after term. The two councilmembers in my area have very strong pro-environment views that are probably a bit ahead of their constituency in many ways. The mayor's sustainability initiative will give councilmembers a chance to educate their constituency and bring them up to speed.

If ever there was a moment to put together the political will to seriously address environmental sustainability, it is now. And I believe the way to do it is to engage in a series of neighborhood experiments to spur innovation in public policy to try solve a set of issues in different ways and see if they work. For instance, the "Green a Block" initiative is a wonderful experiment to see how to renovate existing housing stock, educate apartment dwellers and local businesses and see how much impact there is on energy efficiency. Other experiments are needed to start building truly bike friendly neighborhoods with grade separated bike lanes and secure indoor bike parking.

One set of conservative institutions that will need serious education and horizon widening are the city's 59 community boards. These local boards have typically been very parochial, NIMBY oriented and tend to defend the status quo on most issues. While this served a useful counterpoint during the days of heavy handed Robert Moses behavior by City Hall, they now seem more concerned about protecting every last parking spot in the city - hardly a plank in the sustainability platform. It is incumbent on every city council member and borough president to review who they nominate to the local community boards and ask one simple question: "Is this person open-minded and shows a willingness to experiment?" If not, they will be an obstacle to experimentation and innovation in public policy rather than a positive partner for community input into city policy.

I've written for the last year and a half on what I think should be included in making NYC more sustainable. In many cases I have found policy ideas that would be fairly cheap to implement and I believe are truly win-win-win, like more greenmarkets, more sidewalk space and bike lanes. The main obstacle to implementation are unfounded local fears of change and that continues to be the main reason they remain undone. In addition to the many specific proposals that many people will offer, I think creating a culture of local community experimentation offers the best bang for the buck in building a more sustainable city.



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