

# An Effective and Inclusive Planning Process

**O**ffice vacancy rates are now 15% in Lower Manhattan and growing each day since convenient transportation and important amenities are not available. Strong leadership and vision must stem the tide, and convince business that Lower Manhattan is, and will continue to be, a good place to be. Laying out a clear plan for investment in critical infrastructure in Lower Manhattan will demonstrate the commitment of the city and state to the health of the area.

## **Produce a comprehensive plan for Lower Manhattan**

The development of a comprehensive plan with short- and long-term strategies for restoring, rebuilding, and renewing Lower Manhattan is an absolute requirement for recovery. Decisions and priorities must be framed within the context of this comprehensive plan, balancing the rebuilding of Lower Manhattan with development in other areas of the city and region, especially now, when there will be intense competition for limited resources.

Decisions about the reconstruction of Lower Manhattan will be most effective if they are supported within a shared vision. Only out of a mutual commitment to a vision of downtown's future can a comprehensive plan and participatory planning process take shape. The NYC Partnership's "Economic Impact Analysis of the September 11th Attack on New York" states, "Urban recovery efforts after several major earthquakes provide an invaluable lesson: those cities that quickly agree on a recovery plan, even though it may take years to implement, maintain their economic strength. . . . By setting a planning process in motion, with a fixed end date, the private sector and other stakeholders will help New York develop the best possible program quickly, avoiding the danger posed by years of debate and paralysis about what to do about downtown."

New planning paradigms will be called for to address the scope and complexity of this effort, particularly in memorializing the events of September 11. The urban plan that evolves should lay the groundwork for Lower Manhattan to reemerge as a world-class center within a city and region of the future while also building on its historic strengths. To achieve this, planners must seek out and incorporate the best ideas about economic vitality and the effect on the workplace of new technologies, innovative transportation systems and other critical infrastructure. The plan should incorporate synergistic relationships between living and working environments and urban open spaces as well as possibilities for more resource-efficient and health-supporting buildings and urban infrastructure.

## **Accomplish the plan through a participatory process**

The plan should be accomplished through a participatory process involving government, the private sector, affected communities, and the public. Rebuilding will require an open, transparent process to decide what to do with the WTC site and Lower Manhattan. Planning for this and other potential redevelopment areas will also require recognizing existing community assets and developing a place-based consensus among community members, the business community, agencies, and other stakeholders. This must include due acknowledgement of relevant rights and responsibilities of existing WTC landowners and leaseholders.

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The first step in developing plans will be to design a participatory framework. The goal should be definition of a commonly shared vision, agreement on principles, and establishment of guidelines. Such a framework would include the following:

- A process for developing a vision for rebuilding based on maximum possible consensus, in an expedited manner and with adequate funding to maximize public input.
- Soliciting public input through outreach, including focus groups, the Internet, cable television, and other means, and incorporating that input into the planning process.
- A schedule for achieving public approvals, including environmental and agency approvals, with analysis of alternatives and impacts integrated into the process.
- Analysis of options developed through the public process not only by clients and approval bodies but also by an Advisory Group of architects, planners, designers, and other relevant professional groups.
- A public education program focusing on planning and design principles using exhibits, panel discussions, electronic and print media, and other forums. Coordination with events and forums advanced by the Civic Alliance, Imagine New York, members of New York New Visions and other groups.
- Clearly defined participant roles during the planning process.
- Use of interactive meetings, web sites, electronic media and other techniques for presenting material, receiving comments and discussing options.
- Funding to achieve these goals.

### **Balance urgency with informed decisions**

Urgent transportation infrastructure decisions must be balanced with broader planning issues, such as the memorial process, which will work on different timelines, with different aims, constituencies, and sensitivities. New York New Visions supports streamlining the approval processes for rebuilding, without sacrificing thoroughness and public input. The framework established for the overall process, therefore, should address ways in which decision-making can be prioritized, stakeholders fully identified, and resources effectively allocated. Establishing a structured process with an achievable schedule will help channel participation and develop the best comprehensive plan in the shortest time.

### **Keep the process focused**

Strong leadership and a capacity to make difficult decisions will be required of the Governor, Mayor and Lower Manhattan Redevelopment Corporation, and those they appoint to lead the planning effort. The NYC City Planning Commission, which has responsibility for comprehensive and long-term planning issues under the NYC Charter, should also have a strong role in planning for rebuilding. Other entities with local planning responsibilities, including but not limited to the Manhattan Borough President, Community Boards, Economic Development Corporation, and Battery Park City Authority should have major roles. Civic groups and not-for-profit organizations, along with the Art Commission and the Landmarks Preservation Commission, should also have a strong voice in the review process. New York New Visions volunteers its collective experience and expertise as an available advisory resource. To the degree that rebuilding is replicating previous uses and densities, existing planning and environmental approvals should apply. Taking advantage of existing approvals and participatory planning tools will best focus the process.

### **Reorganize the building review process to identify and expedite priority projects**

The events of September 11, 2001 disrupted, and will continue to disrupt, the review process. In the short term, an Interagency Task Force should be immediately established to function for at least a two-year period to expedite projects citywide, including high priority projects in Lower Manhattan.

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The Interagency Task Force should be a mayoral-level agency charged with prioritizing and expediting project approvals among all city, state and bi-state agencies. It should be modeled on Mayor Koch's Mayor's Office of Housing Coordination, which operated in the mid-1980's to ensure that priority affordable housing projects made their way quickly through the approval process. Philadelphia currently uses a similar pro-development agency that assists with not only the approval process but also the follow-up and construction phase coordination.

### **Update zoning regulations and provide incentives**

Zoning in New York City would profit from revision to reflect a vision of the city's future. Building on recent approaches, certain areas of the city should be rezoned to permit more significant development opportunities in the context of the surrounding communities. Zoning should become more performance and place based, revised to reflect new and future uses due to the changing nature of work, and responding to the special needs and secondary effects of expanding sectors, such as the health industries.

A major issue for the rebuilding of Lower Manhattan and future citywide development is environmental review. We want to strongly emphasize our support for sustainable design, mass transportation improvement, review of environmental issues and an open review process; however the current environmental review process, particularly on the Federal level, and the inherent potential for litigation will discourage the improvement we are recommending. At the World Trade Center site, we recommend legislation stating that no EIS is required to be undertaken for redevelopment up to the previous floor areas and improvements in the supporting infrastructure, provided total open space, including any streets on the site, is maintained or increased, in compliance with the spirit of the National Environment Policy Act (NEPA) and State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA). Other proposals to streamline the process, such as giving the World Trade Center site redevelopment a negative declaration in terms of City Environmental Quality Review Act (CEQR) fulfillment, should also be considered. For the rest of Lower Manhattan and the City as a whole, the process could be streamlined without sacrificing thoroughness or public input by adopting the proposals that have been made by the Alliance for City Environmental Quality Review Reform. In general, CEQR could be better integrated with the planning process.

Significant financial barriers threaten timely rebuilding and the development of significant commercial sub-centers. Financial incentives that affect development include quick and easy assembly of sites, with reduction of lengthy holdouts and competitive construction costs in relation to rental incomes. Meeting the needs of the high-growth sectors and fostering the transfer of technology to business are also important. Targeted sectors for Lower Manhattan could include biotechnology, high technology, small business in general, media, and higher education.

### **Adopt a model building code**

The interests and safety of the general public will be better served by the adoption of a forward-looking and cost-effective building code that is based on the most current national and international research. Model codes are updated and reissued on a regular basis to address changing technology and performance. It would be an inefficient use of precious resources to develop a parallel research and code writing effort on a local basis to duplicate the national code research and development. Code issues arising from events such as the World Trade Center attack are more appropriately addressed in the context of high-rise construction in general and should not be specific to New York City.

The New York City Department of Buildings should target the adoption of a model code as the basis for an updated New York City Building Code. Customization of specific sections of the code would be able to accommodate any unique requirements for New York City.