

New Visions 2030
Working Group E: Concepts for Assisting Local Decision
Making in a Regional Context

Background

The New Visions 2030 effort provides an opportunity to further explore issues of land use and transportation planning, particularly local decision making in a regional context. Working Group E was charged with the task of reviewing this issue, led by staff from CDTC and the Capital District Regional Planning Commission (CDRPC). Following several meetings, the Working Group developed this technical report to document current efforts, to articulate approaches to improve the capacity of municipal planning and approval processes and to improve the external support structure provided to local planners by CDTC and CDRPC.

Issues Explored

- Articulation of the regional context with particular focus on the work of the Quality Region Task Force.
- Challenges to local planning in a regional context were noted including home rule, local planning boards and professional staff, zoning, etc.
- The role New Visions has played in articulating the regional vision with respect to land use and transportation was explored.
- The Community and Transportation Linkage Planning Program, its tremendous impact on the region and the working group's approach to strengthening the program was documented. The Linkage Program is one of the key implementation activities of the New Visions plan.
- Smart growth incentive programs from other parts of the country were reviewed and compared to CDTC's Linkage Program, resulting in several conclusions:
 - CDTC is doing more with less financial resources.
 - The Capital Region is planning without growth.
 - CDTC maximizes the use of federal funds for local planning.
 - CDTC's capital funds are tied directly to local planning through a screening criterion in the TIP candidate project evaluation process that requires the project be tied to local planning activities.
 - Linkage awards are not grants and the regional/local relationship allows CDTC staff to pursue implementation of New Visions at the local level.
- Additional and evolving methods of local planning assistance were described along with the implementation of local plans.
- A new model for regional planning was articulated.

Policy/Budget Implications and/or Recommendations

- Suggests updating strategies and actions related to pro-actively planning vibrant communities. See strategies on page 3. No major policy implications.
- Report includes discussion on implementing local plans including the role the Transportation Improvement Program can play. CDTC continues to make steady progress on all New Visions budget categories in the TIP which allows for funding to support implementing the recommendations from Linkage Program studies. Also, because of CDTC's strong consideration of local planning in project programming, it is has been unnecessary for CDTC to dedicate a portion of its federal TIP dollars to special smart growth projects. Inherently, any project under consideration for addition to the TIP will be consistent with local land use planning and will likely follow many of the smart growth/quality communities principles aspired to in the Linkage Program.

STRATEGIES

With this new model for regional planning in mind, Working Group E discussed some specific ideas that could help CDTC and CDRPC more fully realize the model's potential. Many ideas build upon existing efforts and have the potential to deal with some of the remaining challenges in the regional dialogue. The recommendations are listed below in no particular order. However, a few of the ideas are noted as being recommended High Priorities.

- 1) **Update the Pro-active Planning Actions Currently Highlighted in New Visions (High Priority).** Specific to the land use and transportation connection, New Visions outlines nine actions that are intended to support the strategy of pro-actively planning vibrant communities (for additional detail, see Appendix A). These actions are to:

- Prepare and maintain a comprehensive Regional Development Plan
- Establish an urban service area
- Provide funding for and staff participation in community based planning
- Develop access management plans for all priority network arterials
- Support local planning boards' consideration of the regional transportation impacts of development decisions
- Improve site design practices
- Elevate consideration of transportation alternatives in siting facilities that primarily serve elderly and handicapped populations
- Improve delivery access for commercial vehicles
- Maintain a program for transportation projects directed explicitly at community enhancement or regional economic development

Although CDTC has made significant progress on many of these actions, some may require revision. As mentioned earlier, a new Regional Development Plan for the region is not likely to occur. The 1978 Plan was never adopted by the four counties, only endorsed, and CDRPC's members recently determined that there is no longer a mandate to develop such a plan. In addition, the prospect of establishing an urban service area for the region is fairly low. The urban service area concept was to help encourage new commercial and residential development to locate in areas with adequate water, sewer, and transportation infrastructure. Public investment for transportation projects would then be prioritized within this area to encourage urban redevelopment and protect rural character. With the challenges of home rule and current New York State policies, establishing an urban service area for the region may be politically difficult.

As a result, Working Group E recommends that the pro-actively planning vibrant communities section be revised to describe what could be termed Regional Development Initiatives. Local communities would be encouraged to pursue these initiatives in their everyday planning work. They would focus on land use and transportation strategies that support smart growth and potentially influence

urban form wherever growth is occurring. Much of the material is already in the plan, it simply needs to be repackaged and should incorporate any new concepts that arise from the efforts of the Quality Region Task Force and the New Visions 2030 update process.

- 2) **Develop a New Visions Planning Guidebook (High Priority).** New Visions is full of many policies, principles, strategies and actions which also make the plan very lengthy. The Executive Summary to the 1997 plan was helpful in summarizing the key points and in many ways remains relevant today as the bulk of the plan has not changed significantly. However, the New Visions 2030 effort is likely to lead to more significant changes than past plan updates necessitating new material to highlight key concepts. Although a new executive summary should be developed, it could be complemented by the development of a New Visions Planning Guidebook.

A New Visions Planning Guidebook would serve as a resource for local planners, Planning Board members and others involved with community development. The Guidebook would encourage local consideration of the regional impacts of development in the planning and development review process, particularly with respect to the transportation system. It would also include illustrated examples of the Regional Development Initiatives, perhaps in the form of companion summaries, factsheets or “how-to” guides. The Greenway Guides produced as part of the Greenway Connections Report in Dutchess County could serve as a model (the greenway guides can be viewed at www.co.dutchess.ny.us/EnvironmentLandPres/ELPgreenwayguide.htm). The Greenway Connections report was produced as part of the Hudson River Valley Greenway Compact Program.

Some of the concepts that could be highlighted include site design techniques, connected street networks, the design of local, county and state road systems, access/arterial management strategies, mixed use and transit oriented development, etc. Other concepts to be considered include the development of a smart growth/quality community matrix/ checklist. Such a matrix/checklist could help planning boards assess the ability of a development proposal or a local comprehensive plan to meet local and regional goals as outlined in New Visions. Local governments could also create incentives to entice developers to develop in a more sustainable way through tax breaks, reduced development fees, etc. Finally the Guidebook could list existing tools/data sets available from CDTC and CDRPC.

- 3) **Develop a New Visions Training Program (High Priority).** CDTC in partnership with CDRPC should develop a New Visions training program for community development directors, local planners and Planning Board members, local government officials, neighborhood associations, not-for-profits and a wide variety of other stakeholders. The training program could be a two hour program that focuses on the Regional Development Initiatives contained in New Visions

and how they can be applied at the local level. The training program would complement the New Visions Planning Guidebook. Such a training program would increase the visibility of CDTC in the region, it would increase the awareness of New Visions as more than just a transportation plan and it would assist in CDTC's continuous public involvement and outreach activities. CDTC staff could bring the training program to a wide variety of forums ranging from local planning board meetings to county or regional workshops.

- 4) **Engage County Planning.** Of all the entities that serve in a regional capacity, county planning is one with real influence in New York State. County planning should be further engaged in all regional initiatives and should be viewed as true partners in getting the message to local governments. Some of this is already happening and additional effort should be made to help county planners support local planning while promoting the regional vision. The key is to get regional, county and local planners speaking the same language with respect to planning and development issues. Perhaps a special working group comprising of county planners, CDTC and CDRPC staff should be considered.
- 5) **Review Linkage Study Progress.** CDTC should undertake a review of completed linkage studies to see to what degree they have been successfully implemented. This could highlight areas that represent weaknesses in implementation opportunities, weaknesses in the plans themselves or other lessons learned that can lead to changes in the Linkage Program or additional assistance initiatives. Along with this review, the Linkage Program section of CDTC's website should be elevated as a go to resource for local land use and transportation planning issues. The site should include examples of "best practices", funding announcements, links to other reference material, links to services offered by CDRPC and other entities such as state agencies, etc. The site could also be reorganized as part of the New Visions Planning Guidebook concept.
- 6) **Further Develop the Linkage Regional Coordination Forum.** CDTC has recently broadened the membership of the Forum to include all municipalities in the region, not just those involved in the Linkage Program. Outreach should continue to be made to entities such as the Center for Economic Growth, the NY Planning Federation, state agencies and others with an interest in local planning. In addition, this group could be charged with additional tasks such as reviewing and developing material for the New Visions Planning Guidebook and training program.
- 7) **Document Project Financing Methods beyond the TIP.** The availability of state and federal funds for transportation projects varies from year to year, sometimes widely. With current shortfalls in state funding, projects that do more than repave a road or reconstruct a bridge have become more difficult to finance through state and federal funds alone. As the expectations for the overall transportation system continue to rise, it can not be expected that there will be

enough state and federal dollars to cover the costs of all the projects arising from Linkage Studies. The state DOT and other entities can not do it alone and alternative funding arrangements must be developed. Public/private partnerships should be encouraged as well as the use of mitigation fees, transportation development districts and other innovative financing techniques. Examples of best practices from around the region and the state should be documented and used to educate local governments on the opportunities available to them.

- 8) **Strengthen the Link Between the TIP and Local Planning.** CDTC has a strong, respected process with respect to programming transportation projects. As stated previously, projects are required to be consistent with local land use plans. Working Group E believes the existing TIP evaluation process should be continued and suggests that all of CDTC's competitive programs such as the SPOT improvement program for small scale bicycle and pedestrian projects specifically require consistency with local land use planning in their evaluation criteria.