A Region at Risk: The Third Regional Plan for the New York-New Jersey-Connecticut Metropolitan Area

New York - May 1996

By Robert D. Yaro and Tony Hiss
Thomas K. Wright, Editor

Scale and Nature

The Third Regional Plan, published in 1996, put the New York metropolitan region in a global context and concluded that its economic vitality and quality of life were at risk: the region was facing years of slow growth and uncertainty, it was suffering from underinvestment in infrastructure, it was showing social divisions and tensions, and environmental degradation was deepening.

At the same time, the Plan acknowledged that the region was facing a future in which it had to compete in a global economy that offered new opportunities and posed new challenges.

The Plan built on the previous two plans of 1929 and 1968 highlighting their foresight in taking up a regional perspective as the proper scale and context of analyzing and addressing these issues. Metropolitan regions were becoming the dominant economic environmental and social actors of the future – even more so than in the previous decades.

The Plan sounded the alarm that “...economic development is too often border warfare, as states within the region try to steal businesses from each other in a zero-sum game. Social issues are either ignored or placated by a vast welfare system that fails to bring people into the economic mainstream. And environmental efforts focus on short-term solutions that attack the symptoms rather than the causes of problems.”

RPA’s plan reconnected the region to its basic foundations – the “three E’s” – economy, environment and equity – that form the basis of its quality of life, prosperity and vitality. It took a holistic approach, incorporating principles of sustainable development and bringing social, economic and environmental benefits to the region’s communities.

Objectives and Strategies

The Plan’s fundamental goal was to rebuild the three E’s through investments and policies that integrated and built on the region’s advantages rather than focusing on just one of these areas to the detriment of the other two.

RPA pioneered the concept of educating the public about how alternative planning and zoning can meet local needs without compromising the region’s resources. The concept was refined in the Third Regional Plan. Here, the future of an urban center is projected under conventional and alternative planning and development guidelines.
After a thorough analysis of the region’s economy, environment and social equity, the plan warned that the promise of sustainable economic growth driven by productivity gains and access to larger markets could fail without new investments in infrastructure, communities, environments and the workforce.

The Plan identified concrete strategies for improving the region's quality of life by reinforcing the three cornerstone E's and demonstrating how the economy, equity and environment were vitally linked to each other.

The Plan put forth five initiatives – Greensward, Centers, Mobility, Workforce and Governance. Each campaign addressed all three E's and together they were designed to re-energize the region by re-greening, reconnecting and re-centering it.

The Greensward campaign safeguards the region's green infrastructure of forests, watersheds, estuaries and farms and establishes green limits for future growth. Major recommendations included:

- Establish 11 regional reserves that protect open space and function as an urban growth boundary, including the NJ-NY-CT Highlands and Long Island Sound.
- Reinvest in urban parks and restore and create new public spaces in urban neighborhoods and along waterfronts, such as the Brooklyn Greenway and Governors Island.
- Create a regional network of greenways that provide access to recreational areas.

Centers campaign focuses the next generation of growth in the region’s existing downtown employment and residential areas. The Campaign recommended:

- Strengthening the region’s Central Business District by building a Crosstown light-rail system and district, expanding transit access to Lower Manhattan and the Jersey City waterfront and revitalizing Downtown Brooklyn and Long Island City.
- Create incentives for new development and investment around transit hubs.
- Support new institutions and uses in centers such as mixed use districts and arts and cultural institutions.

The Mobility campaign creates a new transportation network that knits together the re-strengthened centers:

- Build a Regional Express Rail system, including the Second Avenue Subway, East Side Access, and Access to the Region’s Core.
• Promote congestion-busting through road-pricing and market approaches, such as tolls and employer incentives. Also finish missing links in the highway network that support existing centers or remedy notorious bottlenecks.

• Improve commercial transportation by building a freight rail trans-Hudson crossing and cutting congestion on the highway system.

The Workforce campaign provides groups and individuals living in these centers with the skills and connections needed to bring them into the economic mainstream:

• Improve education in low-income communities by combining state financing of public education with local management reforms and teaching innovations.

• Reconnect education and the workplace with local school-to-work alliances linking schools to employers, state tax incentives to encourage continuous education for adult workers, and a tri-state council of business, labor, education, and civic leaders to coordinate workforce development initiatives.

• Bring immigrants and minorities into the mainstream economy by expanding English literacy programs, legitimizing informal economic activities, and seeking moderate reform of federal immigration statues.

• Connect low-income communities by expanding support for community-based organizations, improving transportation links to job centers, and using new information technologies to expand job information networks.

Achieving these needs will require new ways of organizing and energizing the political and civic institutions, as outlined in the Governance campaign:

• Coordinate governance in the region through state growth management plans, education finance reform, service sharing, and new regional coalitions.

The Plan proposed an annual G-3 governors conference to coordinate policies and investments and a regional compact between the three governors to reduce “border warfare” economic development policies. It also put forth the ideas of a tri-state Congressional coalition to fight for essential federal tax and regulatory reforms and infrastructure funds and a tri-state Business Council composed of the major regional chambers of commerce to coordinate regional promotion and advocacy and to develop a regional business plan.

The plan also envisioned the creation of new public institutions to finance and provide regional services, such as a tri-state regional transportation authority, a restructured Port Authority and a tri-state infrastructure bank. And finally, it pushed forth improvement in the public and private decision-making, advocating for making processes more transparent, incorporating sustainable economics in accounting and tax and regulatory systems and using smart infrastructure approaches to capital investment.

In the fourteen years since its completion, the Third Regional Plan has become a catalyst for major policy reforms and investments in mass transit, sustainable development and open space that have transformed the region’s quality of life, economic vitality and sustainability. More than $75 billion has been invested in the transit system over this period, including the first expansion of the regional rail network in more than half a century. RPA has led major advocacy campaigns in support of these investments. Several large ecosystems have been protected through RPA’s advocacy, including several of the ecosystems identified in the Plan. Finally, major steps have been taken to revitalize the region’s urban centers, much of this as a result of RPA’s advocacy efforts.

RPA’s Third Regional Plan was the first in a new generation of metropolitan plans in cities across the United States. Several of these have been completed by civic groups modeled after RPA. Many of the Plan’s principles, for example the concept that world cities should be developed as polycentric regions, organized around networks of regional centers and linked by modern regional rail networks, are now being adopted by regions all over the world.