

Investing in the Virtuous Cycle

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The adverse impacts of climate change are increasingly becoming manifest in the New York metropolitan region. Superstorm Sandy in 2012 (Sandy) served as the proverbial wake up call for the region resulting in 91 deaths¹ and over \$65 billion in damages across its path,² bringing New York City (NYC), the region's thriving economic engine, to a grinding halt for days. Tunnels and bridges shut down, wastewater treatment plants spilled billions of gallons of untreated sewage into the sensitive estuary system, and today, more than six years later, many neighborhoods are still working to recover.

Outside the context of extreme storms like Sandy, heavier precipitation events, compromised water and air quality, warmer temperatures, and sea level rise are increasingly taking their toll on communities, aging infrastructure, and stressed natural systems. As the Fourth National Climate Assessment highlights, all of these adverse impacts disproportionately affect low-income communities, which comprise about one-third of the population of the NYC metropolitan area (NYMA).³ These communities are limited in their adaptive capacity to cope with such stressors—much less adapt.

Regional Plan Association (RPA) is a nearly century-old research, planning and advocacy organization that promotes the 31-county NYMA's prosperity, sustainability, health, and equity. Since the 1920s, RPA has developed groundbreaking long-range plans to guide the growth of the region. RPA's recently-released *Fourth Regional Plan* made climate change one of its key research pillars, with about one-third of the plan's recommendations directly tackling the issue.⁴ The process to develop the plan was heavily influenced by the perspectives of local community-based organizations, which RPA integrated into the planning process with philanthropic support from the Ford and JPB foundations. Local community-based organizations—many without a core environmental mission or the capacity to integrate the latest climate change research into their work—are increasingly faced with addressing the impacts of climate change in their day-to-day work.

Building on the partnership model pioneered as part of its *Fourth Regional Plan*, RPA calls on financial institutions to invest in regional-local partnerships between research and planning groups and local community-based organizations. Greater proliferation of such pairings will result in a virtuous cycle of regional research driven by local experience

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- 1 Centers for Disease Control. "Deaths Associated with Hurricane Sandy—October–November 2012," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (2013), available at <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6220a1.htm>.
 - 2 National Hurricane Center. "Costliest U.S. Tropical Cyclones Tables Updated," *National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration* (2018), available at <https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/news/UpdatedCostliest.pdf>.
 - 3 U.S. Global Change Research Program. *Impacts, Risks, and Adaptation in the United States: Fourth National Climate Assessment*, Volume II (Reidmiller, D.R. et al. [eds.]), (2018). doi: 10.7930/NCA4.2018
 - 4 Regional Plan Association. "Fourth Regional Plan" (2017), available at <http://fourthplan.org/>.

and local community development informed by regional data analysis and trends, which would advance better and more equitable policies and higher quality of life in all of our communities.

Advancing Climate Solutions for the NYMA

Since the 1920s, RPA has developed groundbreaking long-range plans to guide the growth of the NYMA. Ideas and recommendations put forth in these plans have led to the establishment of some of the region's most significant infrastructure, open space, and economic development projects, including new bridges and roadways, improvements to the transit network, the preservation of vital open space, and the renewed emphasis on creating sustainable communities centered around jobs and transit.

RPA's general research approach around a given topic typically involves compiling and analyzing relevant publicly-available data in concert with in-depth research into trends and best practices, guided by stakeholder input, in order to develop recommendations for innovations and policy changes at all levels of governance. The organization promotes its findings and recommended actions through a dedicated effort to build strategic alliances, communicate, and advocate for them.

The organization has been focused on the topic of climate change since the release of its *Third Regional Plan: A Region at Risk*,⁵ which warned about the potential impacts of failing to curb our greenhouse gas emissions. As this and other similar warnings went unheeded and the threat of climate change impacts started to become a reality, the organization increasingly focused its environmental efforts to conduct research and communicate the need for climate solutions, including adaptation and mitigation.

One of the goals of RPA's work is to make complicated topics easier to understand for decision-makers, stakeholder organizations, and the general public. Our work to mainstream the issue of climate change has evolved over the years from an issue associated with other projects, to one that we provide strategic advice on, to a featured issue of our research and advocacy, including America 2050,⁶ a national planning program which focused on the need to address greenhouse gas emissions through improved land use decisions, regional compacts, and better transportation options. RPA has produced and led research on over a dozen major climate related initiatives in the NYMA covering every-

5 Regional Plan Association. "3rd Regional Plan: A Region at Risk" (1996), available at <http://library.rpa.org/pdf/RPA-Plan3-A-Region-at-Risk.pdf>.

6 Regional Plan Association. "America 2050" (2005), available at <http://www.america2050.org/pdf/America2050prospectus.pdf>.

thing from managed retreat to climate finance.⁷

A Virtuous Cycle: Regional Policy Research and Local Community Experience

As a research-based organization focused on the long-term prosperity, sustainability, health, and equity of the NYMA, one of RPA's core strengths lies in the analysis of regional data to identify trends and build the case for improved policies and wise investments. At the same time, the region's many community-based organizations work hard every day to improve the lives of community members at the local level, while providing educational and other related services for them.

All too often, these processes—regional planning and community development—proceed in parallel with very little intersection. The end result can be a damaging disconnect between regional policy formulation and the local community experience and, at the same time, community development proceeding without the benefit of research trends and findings. Absent the input of individuals, particularly the region's most economically distressed residents and communities of color, valuable insights are lost and there is an inherent risk of repeating the planning and policy mistakes of the past.

Namely, policies that have perpetuated inequality between people of different races, ethnicities, abilities, incomes, ages, genders, and other social identities, including: unequal access to financing; restrictive covenants; blockbusting; redlining and racial steering; environmental injustices with disparate impacts; urban highway construction that tore apart immigrant communities and communities of color; and transportation that served only some parts of the population, all perpetuated an unequal society. Recognizing the importance of the local informing the regional and the regional informing the local, RPA has found ways to create a virtuous cycle between the two approaches in recent planning efforts, including the development of our *Fourth Regional Plan* and a project aimed at implementing some of the resilience measures proposed by the plan at a neighborhood scale, called "Equitable Adaptation."

The Fourth Regional Plan

The purpose of RPA is—once a generation—to research and produce a long-range plan with recommendations for new or improved policy and planning as well as investments into regional infrastructure, and to then advocate for the implementation of those recommendations. Over the course of its history, RPA has sought the engagement of stakeholders at many different levels to inform the research of its regional plans, from surveys and focus groups

7 Regional Plan Association. "Where to Reinforce and Where to Retreat" (2015), available at <http://library.rpa.org/pdf/RPA-4RP-Whitepaper-Where-to-Reinforce-Where-to-Retreat.pdf>; Keenan, J.M. "Regional Resilience Trust Funds: An Exploratory Analysis for the New York Metropolitan Region," Regional Plan Association (2017), available at <http://library.rpa.org/pdf/Keenan-Regional-Resilience-Trust-Funds-2017.pdf>; and Keenan, J.M. "Regional Resilience Trust Funds: An Exploratory Analysis for Leveraging Insurance Surcharges," *Environment Systems and Decisions*, 38(1) (2018), pp. 118-139. doi: 10.1007/s10669-017-9656-3

to Emmy Award-winning promotional videos. As it embarked on its most recent plan, the organization set out to reach deeper into communities than it ever had before with a new model of community engagement focused on including constituencies that have traditionally been underrepresented in planning processes. With support and guidance from the Ford and JPB foundations, RPA collaborated with organizations that have members or networks representing low-income individuals and communities of color, as well as other underrepresented constituencies. Collectively, the *Fourth Regional Plan* partner organizations represent over 50,000 low-income residents and residents of color in the region.

In the first phase of our multi-year collaboration, partners held dozens of workshops and surveyed more than 1,500 individuals and families from underrepresented groups around the region. Community partners surveyed individuals on busses, knocked on doors, held focus groups and larger workshops to learn that the most important challenge for low-income residents in the region is battling a growing sense of instability. Job insecurity, unsafe housing conditions, capricious evictions, lack of access to quality food, health care and other services, ever increasing cost of living, and racial discrimination combine to make the day-to-day feel unpredictable for the region's low-income communities. These residents expressed the desire to be more meaningfully included in decision-making processes with the potential to improve their quality of life and provided critical stories that shaped the plan.

In the second phase, partner organizations brought community leaders to RPA to participate in strategy and solutions sessions around draft recommendations directly with RPA research staff. RPA and a nonprofit community planning group, Hester Street Collaborative, created visuals and activities that communicated *Fourth Regional Plan* findings and preliminary proposals. These enabled the gathering of input on preliminary community development, resilience, and infrastructure recommendations. Community leaders used the same tools to communicate fourth plan findings and preliminary recommendations at community workshops around the region. Participants critiqued RPA's proposed mechanisms to revitalize communities while protecting against residential displacement, to protect vulnerable residents from rising sea levels, and to connect less dense areas. The process yielded many insights for RPA and community participants and strengthened plan proposals in their early stages to improve quality of life for low-income residents.

In the third phase and beyond, RPA and community partners shifted to implementation of *Fourth Regional Plan* recommendations that most strongly support improved quality of life for low-income residents in the tri-state region. RPA and partners focus work on building local capacity such that underrepresented constituencies become better equipped to advocate for more inclusive land use and planning, allowing for the construction of more affordable housing, better connectivity, and more environmental resilience. RPA and partners also jointly wrote an equity agenda for the NYMA, committing to continue collaborating in the future, in order to promote the equitable implementation of the *Fourth Regional Plan*.

Soon after its release, RPA, in partnership with Make the Road New York (MRNY), worked together to focus implementation of the plan at the local level in Central Queens.

MRNY is a community-based organization with a mission to build the power of Latino and working-class communities to achieve dignity and justice through organizing, policy innovation, transformative education, and survival services in the neighborhoods of Jackson Heights, Elmhurst, and Corona in the New York City borough of Queens. Tackling issues of equity and climate change, the project, *Equitable Adaptation*, has built on the comprehensive community engagement process initiated as part of the *Fourth Regional Plan* with the purpose of improving the adaptive capacity and community resilience of Queens' communities, in particular, those low-income communities of color whom MRNY serves.

Equitable Adaptation solidified RPA's and MRNY's working relationships and married RPA's research and planning capabilities with MRNY's on-the-ground knowledge and community organizing prowess to uncover the ways that climate change affects low-income households and communities of color and to increase the capacity of community organizers and community members to tackle its detrimental causes and effects. RPA had already carried out mapping analyses of such issues as storm surge and sea level rise flooding, urban heat island impact, and how they affect these communities. The organization's demographic analyses had also indicated that these communities were among the region's most ethnically diverse, had much higher levels of non-citizens than average, and had higher levels of poverty than surrounding neighborhoods. But working together with MRNY, through surveys of residents, stakeholder workshops, and local insights of community leaders, a deeper level of analysis was achieved that allowed the two groups to move beyond traditional policy recommendations. For example, the joint effort revealed that the obvious impacts of coastal storm-flooding and sea level rise experienced by waterfront communities are felt differently by more inland, low-income communities of color like East Elmhurst and Corona. In these communities, the impacts of climate change are experienced more as a domino effect that impacts a resident's ability to get to work or school, their physical and mental health, and their safety. The project's final report issued recommendations that reflected the multi-dimensional level of analysis, grouping them according to:

- ***Personal Adaptation***, including small actions that individuals and families can take to cope with the stress of climate change and its direct and indirect effects;
- ***Collective Resiliency***, focusing on the opportunity to build the capacity of MRNY as a community-based organization by adapting or enhancing existing programs and applying a resilience lens; and
- ***Community Advocacy***, which identifies the cross-cutting, co-beneficial policy improvements that local residents and stakeholder groups such as MRNY can advocate for to help adapt their community and others like it to the effects of climate change.

The two organizations were recently awarded additional funding by New York Community Trust to carry out a subset of the actions recommended in the project's report. Such funding will continue to support the virtuous cycle this project has brought about.

Funding the Virtuous Cycle

The two examples described above could not have been possible without generous philanthropic support. The missions of the three foundations that supported RPA's work with community-based organizations were well-aligned with what the collaborative of groups set out to do. The unfortunate truth, however, is that in the long history of RPA, these collaborations comprise but a small percentage of the funded opportunities the organization has achieved. The value of such partnerships—to both the organizations involved as well as to greater society from the concepts and proposals that emerge from them—far exceed the investments to make them happen.

Going forward, RPA calls on financial institutions, under the umbrella of Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) community development activities, to expand investments into such regional-local partnerships. These investments would expand the virtuous cycle in more places and help to add capacity to local organizations and expand the body of knowledge to regional organizations, resulting in better policies and actions that improve the quality of life in neighborhoods. As financial institutions consider such investments, they should look to other models that have, to varying levels of success, enabled such virtuous pairings. Two examples include the Wells Fargo Regional Foundation and the 2011-15 Sustainable Communities Initiative Regional Planning Grant Program.

Wells Fargo Regional Foundation

The Wells Fargo Regional Foundation awards both planning and implementation grants for Neighborhood Planning initiatives to “support long-term, resident-driven neighborhood revitalization” in Eastern Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware.⁸ Grants are awarded primarily to local community-based organizations. However, they require the participation of planning consultants. The majority of projects employ private planning firms, but RPA in 2012 partnered with two local organizations—St. Joseph's Carpenter Society and Cooper's Ferry Partnership—in Camden, NJ to carry out a neighborhood plan for East Camden. St. Joseph's Carpenter Society's local knowledge plus Cooper's Ferry Partnership's outreach strength, along with RPA's research and planning expertise, resulted in an award-winning neighborhood plan called My East Camden which today is being implemented. This financial-institution-backed grant program has many notable qualities which could be replicated by other institutions.

Sustainable Communities Initiative: Regional Planning Grant Program

Between 2011 and 2015, a cross-section of federal agencies, including the U.S. Housing and Urban Development, the U.S. Department of Transportation, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, among others, collaborated and offered funding to support

⁸ Wells Fargo Regional Foundation. “Mission,” available at <https://www.wellsfargo.com/about/corporate-responsibility/community-giving/regional-foundation/>.

regional and local planning efforts to help communities integrate housing, transportation, infrastructure, and environmental goals into a vision for a better future under the Sustainable Communities Initiative. Under the initiative, a Regional Planning Grant Program supported locally-led efforts that encouraged collaboration between diverse regional interests. In 2011, RPA received a grant through the program and led the New York-Connecticut Sustainable Communities Consortium which was comprised of nine cities, two counties, and five regional entities focused on connecting communities, focusing growth in centers and integrating planning to achieve economic, equity, and environmental goals. Key advisors to the undertaking included local transportation, housing, economic development, and environmental justice and community organizations. Project outcomes included New York City's waterfront planning resilience approach, a housing strategy for Long Island and local smart growth initiatives for communities in Connecticut and the Hudson Valley. The program demonstrated the value of funding local efforts with a regional lens.

Conclusions

RPA's efforts to improve the prosperity, sustainability, health, and equity of the NYMA through regional planning and policy recommendations are ambitious yet built on a legacy of success. As the adverse impacts of climate change worsen, the effects on residents of local communities and the organizations that serve them will require changes to the way we plan and invest. Integrating community development and regional planning across scales and populations is key to advancing our collective adaptive capacity and community resilience.

Financial institutions should consider expanding investments into regional-local partnerships, like those in the NYMA and others across the country. Through such investments, regional planning organizations, like the Metropolitan Planning Council in Chicago and SPUR in San Francisco, as well as university-led planning centers, could become better informed as they develop and advance policy, while community-based organizations increase participation in planning processes and benefit from expanded capacity. Adaptation requires an informed and engaged populace. Informing without engaging and engaging without informing are the hurdles that we must cross in advancing equitable and just climate adaptation.

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