OVERVIEW & CHECKLIST OF MUNICIPAL ENERGY PLANNING STRATEGIES IN NEW YORK STATE

Adam Blair, Community and Regional Development Institute (CaRDI), Cornell University

DRAFT – June 2012

With rising oil costs and ongoing concerns over climate change during the last decade, the need for comprehensive energy planning in the United States has become increasingly urgent. But given the absence of a federal energy policy, it is unclear at what level of government and to what degree long-term energy strategies are being developed. In order to gain a glimpse into what local communities are doing when it comes to energy, this study looks at the extent to which towns and counties in New York State—a state with some of the most aggressive energy policies—are engaged in energy planning activities. This research was accomplished through a search of recent county and municipality comprehensive plans and other planning documents for any language, strategies, or objectives pertaining to energy generation, energy efficiency, or climate change.¹ (Findings are organized in a table that can be found in the appendix.)

Initial findings suggest that, in general, energy issues are often not addressed through comprehensive planning at the local level. While some communities have identified specific strategies, or created certain goals related to energy generation and energy efficiency, the majority of plans searched contain little to no such language. What is most surprising is that many of the findings summarized below come from municipalities and counties belonging to ICLEI,² and should thus represent the communities most committed to sustainability in the state. This suggests that some localities, while committed to pursuing climate- and energy-related goals, may do so not through comprehensive planning but through other means. Indeed, some communities have created separate plans that specifically target environmental- and energy-related goals in addition to a comprehensive plan. The City of New Rochelle’s Sustainability Plan, for instance, is a detailed document covering many of the ways in which the city can reduce its energy use or transition to the use of more alternative forms of energy.

Several factors have emerged that may explain why some communities include no mention of energy in their comprehensive plans: while the size of a municipality does not appear to be a predicting factor of the proclivity for energy planning, the age of a comprehensive plan does. Search results indicate that older plans are less likely to include energy (and climate change) language. Most plans that are less than five years old, however, do include explicit energy strategies or objectives. Perhaps a more general explanation for this omission is that local communities may feel unequipped to control their energy future, instead leaving energy decisions to the state and federal government.

Among counties and municipalities that do include elements of energy planning within their comprehensive plans, there appears to be several primary reasons for doing so. At least one community, the Town of Woodstock, cites the “contentious issues surrounding the provision of traditional forms of energy” as a reason to “encourage the use of clean alternative energy.” While

¹ In most cases, the author performed a word search of planning documents for key terms such as energy, energy efficiency, electricity, renewable resources, nonrenewable resources, and climate change in order to identify relevant sections, strategies, and objectives.

² ICLEI, or Local Governments for Sustainability, is an international association of local governments and their associations that have made a commitment to sustainable development.
this language is now several years old, having been written in 2003, it suggests that decisions regarding energy in Woodstock may have contributed to political division in the past.

By and large, however, the majority of towns involved in energy planning mention a desire to reduce energy consumption, whether through energy efficiency efforts or the use of renewable energy. The Town of Chatham Comprehensive Plan (2009), for instance, mentions in several instances the concept of a “zero energy home,” or a home that does not rely on conventional fossil fuels for heating and electricity. Others communities, such as the Town of Brookhaven, cite the promotion of environmentally friendly lifestyles as a reason for pursuing programs that reduce automobile and fossil fuel dependence.

There is also an acknowledgement by several communities of climate change and carbon emissions. Towns like Huntington mention the “growing awareness of trends such as global climate change” as a reason to diminish the “‘carbon footprint’ of town facilities.” In the Town of Bedford, the independent Energy Advisory Panel set a goal in 2007 of 20 percent carbon emissions reduction by 2020, and some larger municipalities like the City of Albany even have separate climate action plans.

RENEWABLE & NONRENEWABLE ENERGY GENERATION

Beyond general encouragement of developing sources of renewable energy, few communities mention specific steps needed to accomplish their goals. Intriguingly, the author found little mention of the development of traditional forms of energy including oil and gas in comprehensive plans, suggesting that some communities may want to avoid the subject all together. The Town of Chatham’s 2009 Comprehensive Plans is one of the few that outlines a specific strategy for wind energy:

Allow for single family, individual and farm usage wind mills by special use permit and with site plan review…Prohibit large-scale wind farms (Strategy 11.1)

By explicitly prohibiting commercial wind development, this language also appears to accomplish a second goal of preserving the town’s existing agricultural landscape, an objective that is likely shared by many rural upstate New York communities. The City of New Rochelle also intends to regulate energy generation through land use controls. In its recent Sustainability Plan (2010), Initiative 1.5 seeks to “Facilitate the generation of renewable energy by addressing impediments in the local building and zoning codes.” In addition, the plan calls for “exploring opportunities for energy production on public lands.”

In cases where the development of renewable or nonrenewable energy sources are neither prohibited nor promoted through the use of zoning and other land use controls, some towns have included in their planning efforts goals related to municipal facilities and operations themselves. In the Town of Pound Ridge, for instance, the government contracted to obtain “100% of its electricity for town owned properties from alternative sources” in order to “set an example for its residents.” The City of Binghamton, similarly, has committed to obtaining 30 percent of electricity used for municipal operations from renewable sources by 2025 (Energy & Climate Action Plan, § 2.2). Other communities have agreed to similar goals, indicating that change begins most easily with government itself. The City of Cortland, in its 2011 Comprehensive Plan, sought in Goal 47, §IX, to generate electricity from alternative sources under a “phased program” that would “initially serve small facilities (Public Works, City Hall, etc.).”
ENERGY EFFICIENCY

Energy efficiency is the most common category of strategies and objectives found among communities involved in energy planning. Reducing energy consumption in both the construction and transportation structures, more specifically, is a reoccurring goal in many comprehensive plans that address energy. With regard to buildings and development, towns and counties recognize opportunities for reducing energy efficiency during periods of both construction and rehabilitation. In the Town of Chatham, LEED© standards are encouraged for new development and redevelopment, and Strategy 11.2 of their comprehensive plan states that “Zoning and other land use regulations shall not place barriers for building [energy efficient] structures.” In the towns of Dryden and Huntington, goals such as the “conservation of…water resources” and “reduced…waste generation” are cited alongside aims of reducing energy consumption.

The Village of Mamaroneck lists some of the most tangible energy efficiency strategies found among the comprehensive plans scanned for the purposes of this study (§ 2.3):

   Amend the Village Code to include requirements and incentives for green buildings

   Pass EnergyStar legislation to facilitate “green” residential projects. One approach is to require residential developments to comply with EnergyStar guidelines

Again there is a sense that municipalities recognize that their ability to regulate land use provides one of the best opportunities for pursuing goals related to energy generation and conservation.

Strategies organized under the broad category of transportation are also relatively prevalent within large energy planning efforts. Of those comprehensive plans that include language related to energy and transportation, a majority recognizes the nexus between vehicle miles traveled and energy consumption. To this end several communities promote transit-oriented development as a way to “minimize automobile dependency” (Brookhaven 2030, § 2.2). Some municipalities have separate bicycle/pedestrian master plans, including the Village of Croton-on-Hudson. In this 2009 document, the village outlines its vision of a “21st mindset for travel in the village and region where health, environmental, and energy conservation objectives merge” (§ II).

Similar to the approach taken with buildings, communities like the Village of Mamaroneck and the City of New Rochelle envision government leading the way in terms of transportation efficiency. Section 2.3 of Mamaroneck’s 2011 Comprehensive Plan states a goal of “Purchasing more efficient automobiles and trucks in the Village’s fleets,” and Initiative 1.4, Part I, of New Rochelle’s Sustainability Plan (2010) similarly states that city vehicles should be replaced or converted in order to “improve average gas mileage, utilize alternative fuel technology, and reduce the emission of air pollutants.”

With the exception of some municipalities (the City of Binghamton being one of them), few communities identified an explicit link between land use changes and energy use in their comprehensive planning efforts. In Binghamton’s Energy & Climate Action Plan, § 2.3 called for reducing “energy consumed and emissions produced as a consequence of how land is used and developed,” for instance.

ENERGY LITERACY, CLIMATE CHANGE & OTHER STRATEGIES

A notable omission among many comprehensive plans is any explicit mention of energy education or literacy. While several plans include strategies aimed at promoting citizen efforts at
home or in the workplace, rarely is a link established between encouraging residents to participate in energy savings or renewable energy initiatives and educating them about what they need to know about energy. Among the municipalities that do mention education in their comprehensive plans is the Village of Dobbs Ferry. Under Policy 13.2 in the village’s Local Waterfront Revitalization Program, there is a call to “[educate] residents about State and federal subsidy programs for alternative sources in homes and cars.” The Town of Huntington, similarly, has recognized that “Improving citizen awareness through public outreach and communications is a key to promoting better stewardship of Huntington’s environmental resources.” As such, the town has established a program called “Sustainable Huntington,” an initiative within its comprehensive plan intended to mobilize awareness and action by citizens to achieve a more sustainable future.

More common among comprehensive planning efforts are calls to educate and mobilize residents around efforts to combat climate change. The City of Binghamton, for instance, makes no specific mention of educating the public regarding energy issues, but does identify the following as an objective in its Energy & Climate Action Plan: “Create an informed and motivated public that is engaged [in] combating Climate Change” (§ 5.1).

One of the most novel approaches municipal energy planning can be found in the recently-completed Syracuse Sustainability Plan (2012). In it, Goal 1 calls for the creation of a “City Sustainability Fund,” which will be replenished with savings created through energy efficiency measures. According to the plan, these funds will then be used for “priority energy projects as well as funding departmental projects based on proposals submitted to an energy team comprised of members of Facilities, Bureau of Planning & Sustainability and energy experts.” While it is too early to determine the efficacy of this program, it is nonetheless a unique concept that could be applied in municipalities of various sizes.

**Municipal Energy Planning Checklist**

As climate change and rising oil costs cause local energy planning to become more common, municipalities will benefit by sharing their experiences and developing best practices. And in the absence of a comprehensive energy policy at the national level, the successes of local communities may even inform what federal-level policy does exist. From our scan of municipal energy planning efforts in New York State, we hope to catalyze this process of knowledge sharing with the following energy planning “checklist” of sorts:

- In similar fashion to state renewable portfolio standards, **set a specific target** for energy generation from a specific source and by a given date. Doing so will help you meet larger goals related to the types of energy your community would like to promote.
- **Update local zoning ordinances** to accommodate but also establish guidelines for both commercial and residential energy development. Zoning codes and other land use regulations are effective ways of mitigating the potential negative impacts resulting from certain forms of energy generation.
- Begin to **establish a community energy inventory** by including questions related to energy use and sourcing in your local building permit and site plan approval process. Having a better idea of how and in what amounts energy is used in your community will only make for more effective planning.
- **Promote multi-modal transportation** options and follow Smart Growth principles as a way of reducing vehicle miles traveled and fuel consumption in your community.
Similarly, include **green building provisions** in local building codes as a way of decreasing energy consumption.

☐ Sponsor **educational programs and campaigns** that increase awareness of energy efficiency measures as well as available state and federal polices, subsidies, and incentives for residents and businesses alike.