

**A Pathway to Sustainable American Cities:**  
A Guide to Implementing the SDGs

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Draft for discussion and peer review with city officials

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mayors, city council members, and all who work in city government know that success for a city is nonpartisan. The to-do list is a long one: promote economic development and opportunity, foster security and safety, provide clean drinking water and air, support quality schools, ease transportation and mobility, provide access to health care, promote civic engagement and community, ensure adequate housing, and respond to emergencies and severe weather events (to name a few). This guide encourages cities to take a holistic approach to tackling these challenges, developing an innovative, long-term vision for their cities to thrive and drawing on the experiences of others to guide the way.

Over the last 15 years, U.S. cities of all sizes have started developing long-term sustainability plans that identify demographic trends, anticipate their cities' needs, and set long-term environmental goals. The planning process also often includes a range of input from city residents and other stakeholders, such as civic institutions and the private sector. In addition, the plans are updated regularly and progress is tracked publicly.

At the international level, 193 United Nations countries adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 after a rigorous process that incorporated expert analyses, as well as input from many levels of civic organizations. The 17 SDGs combine economic development plus social, environmental, and good governance goals, recognizing that the goals complement and support one another and are interdependent.

As it turns out, the SDGs and the goals that U.S. cities have been striving toward have a lot in common. They are both widely recognized as a solid foundation for a visionary and achievable framework. Bringing in the SDGs can complement and strengthen traditional sustainability plans by shedding light on how environmental challenges and goals are interwoven with the social and economic conditions of a city and how setting goals and targets in one area may benefit other areas, as well as serve more city residents. Furthermore, adopting the SDGs can help to amplify existing goals and platforms for discussion and development with city residents, state and national government agencies, and across city networks globally. While the SDGs will not all apply in the same way for all cities, they can be prioritized and customized to meet the conditions and requirements for any city.

With this guide, cities can take advantage of the SDG framework and other cities' experiences, saving valuable time and resources in setting goals and strategies while not reinventing the wheel. This guide also provides case studies and examples from U.S. cities that have begun to use the SDGs to fortify their own planning by adapting them to the local context. Cities such as Los Angeles, New York, Orlando, and San José are leading the way, showing the utility of the SDG framework to broaden their ambition and bolster their existing plans and strategies.

Following the ten tested steps within this guide can help make such planning exercises a success. These steps are based upon lessons from recent planning exercises in New York, San José, and other cities, as well as the extensive experience of the authors, who have collectively been involved in urban sustainability planning for more than 30 years.

### **10 Steps to Support Sustainable Development Planning in U.S. Cities**

1. Setting up the leadership and management structure, including budget and timelines, for the planning process
2. Identifying core values for your city
3. Establishing work teams
4. Assembling baseline data, including population trends and economic conditions
5. Taking stock of what your city is already doing that aligns with the SDGs, identifying gaps, and analyzing those most important to fill
6. Identifying budget resources and potential funding sources
7. Developing a draft framework for the plan, including targets, benchmarks, metrics and indicators
8. Identifying stakeholders, outside advisors (including university and academic partners), and community resources; establishing processes to work with them; and integrating their knowledge and ideas into the drafted plan
9. Aligning budgets and accountability mechanisms, including metrics and indicators, and final reviews
10. Launching the plan while establishing the feedback and accountability mechanisms

The SDG framework may help cities identify priorities and set long-term goals. The goals are designed to reveal the interdependent systems at play in sustainable development, such as how the use of fossil fuels affects not only climate change but also air quality and public health, and thus poverty rates and economic opportunities. By following these ten steps, cities can harmonize common goals across agencies. Added benefits include finding gaps, infusing priorities into a budget process, cutting programming redundancies and saving resources, and tracking outcomes. Cities can also engage across an expanding network of other governments and institutions that are pursuing the same goals for ideas and expertise. If integrated and managed well, the SDGs can help to strengthen local communities with their values of transparency, inclusion, and engagement.

No need to reinvent the wheel, no need to add another layer—this guide shows how to fast-track the process from beginning to end. Through the SDGs, cities can improve their quality of life on a local level while leading the world on the environment, the economy, and social issues.

# INTRODUCTION

Cities are where the rubber meets the road. Dreams are made and broken in cities. They are the economic engine for states, regions, and countries. They are centers of innovation and culture. They are also where some of our most profound and intractable problems are most challenging and most apparent. Cities are also where policy can have most direct impact, and where government is required to be most responsive and pragmatic.

If, as Tip O’Neill used to say, “all politics is local,” it is also true that all cities are judged by their quality of life and opportunities, regardless of who happens to be in office. Cities large and small across the U.S. share goals such as providing safety and security, good schools, good jobs, decent housing, access to health care, clean water and air, and reliable and direct transport systems. They aim to provide a steady future and the promise of a ladder up for recent arrivals, as well as long-term residents. No matter a city’s size, climate, economic health, or geography, these goals are remarkably consistent.

This guide takes the best features of the internationally-accepted Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and grounds them in the American system of urban government. It provides a framework that cities can customize to work toward setting their own specific goals within their unique circumstances—identifying gaps, setting up benchmarks and timelines, and taking advantage of strategies and processes that have already been developed through a common, vetted framework. It is intended to strengthen ongoing policymaking rather than add another layer of requirements and expense.

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



## **The Sustainable Development Goals: A Global Vision for Livable Communities, Thriving Economies, and a Healthy Planet**

In 2015, the United States was one of 193 countries within the United Nations to adopt the SDGs and the principles that guide them, including an imperative to leave no one behind. Sometimes referred to as the Global Goals, they are a collection of broad goals related to economic, social, and environmental concerns. Each goal has independent targets, indicators, and timelines with which to assess their progress, but they are also situated within an overarching framework that recognizes their strong interdependence upon one another. For example, achieving quality education and gender equality (SDGs 4 and 5) also support the goals of ending poverty and hunger (SDGs 1 and 2), as well as decent work and economic growth (SDG 8).

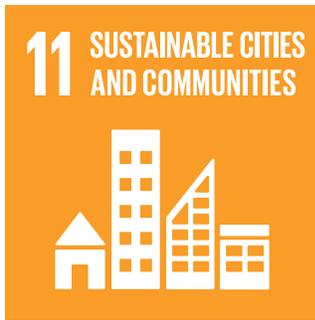
While not all the goals and targets apply in equal measure to all countries and regions, they serve as a common framework to address the essential elements of long-term sustainable development.

The SDGs are big and ambitious. Their intention was to set goals that, while difficult to achieve, are not entirely out of range. They are meant to inspire policymakers and encourage collaboration. They also set targets toward achieving those goals. Last but not least, by tracking progress through specific indicators, policymakers can see how they are moving toward their aims and adjust as necessary to account for new information or changing conditions.

The SDGs have the advantage of tracking very closely with the priorities of the U.S. Conference of Mayors and its member cities, as demonstrated by the resolutions adopted in their 86th Annual Meeting in 2018 (Annex 1). Mayors from across the political spectrum and from all corners of the country have, by consensus, adopted coherent policies around critical topics in sustainable development.

A 2018 study conducted by Bloomberg Philanthropies identified the most common concerns expressed across cities by mayors and city managers. Topics that arose again and again included infrastructure, traffic, climate, inequality, affordable housing, education, drug abuse, crime, budget, and jobs. Shifts in funding are also a primary concern for many mayors, as is a changing relationship with the federal government. These types of issues are all addressed with clear goals and targets in the SDGs.

Within the SDGs, cities are seen as so important to achieving sustainable development that they have their own goal—Goal 11 (see Page 7). The rest of the goals go into depth on issues that have a direct and specific impact on city residents, such as clean water and education, and achieving them will contribute to the economy, livability, and public health in cities. Indeed, the SDGs were written so that the entire framework would be relevant at different scales and could be localized, ensuring that no one is left behind and that different jurisdictions of government and stakeholders across society can move in the same direction, toward the same common goals.



**SDG 11 Sustainable cities and communities: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable**

Goal 11 has ten targets. For the most part, they track U.S. cities’ common goals, many of which appear in the U.S. Conference of Mayors’ priorities.

11.1 By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums.



11.2 By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible, and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities, and older persons.



11.3 By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated, and sustainable human settlement planning and management in countries.

11.4 Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage.



11.5 By 2030, significantly reduce the number of deaths and the number of people affected and substantially decrease the direct economic losses relative to global gross domestic product caused by disasters, including water-related disasters, with a focus on protecting the poor and people in vulnerable situations.

11.6 By 2030, reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management.



11.7 By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive, and accessible green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons, and persons with disabilities.

11.A Support positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban, and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning.



11.B By 2020, substantially increase the number of cities and human settlements adopting and implementing integrated policies and plans towards inclusion, resource efficiency, mitigation, and adaptation to climate change, resilience to disasters, and develop and implement, in line with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, holistic disaster risk management at all levels.

11.C Support least developed countries, including through financial and technical assistance, in building sustainable and resilient buildings utilizing local materials.

# How can the SDGs support U.S. Cities to plan for and achieve sustainable development?

Cities of all sizes began developing long-term sustainability plans over the last 15 years to identify and respond to trends that would affect livability and environmental conditions. These plans typically shared several characteristics:

1. a time horizon lasting beyond one mayoral term;
2. the inclusion of population and growth projections;
3. valuing the local environment;
4. targeted actions that bolster the environment, whether through enhancing parks, improving public transit, cleaning up contaminated sites, or improving water and air quality; and
5. identifying climate action as a priority—both in setting greenhouse gas reduction goals and the initiatives to meet them—and planning for resilience after extreme weather events such as heat waves and flooding.

The planning process often also includes a range of input from city residents and other stakeholders, such as key civic and economic sectors. In addition, the plans are updated regularly and progress is tracked publicly. City plans with these features include New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Boston, among many others.

As cities have implemented and gained experience in this new type of policy planning, lessons have emerged. Aligning priorities and goals across city agencies has improved communication and efficiency among them. Incorporating specific benchmarks, allocating budgets, and improving data to feed into the metrics and indicators improve how cities manage progress toward their goals. Including input from residents and stakeholders—and at times, even working with them to design the programs—has improved the quality of programs and strengthened public support. The focus on key priorities—with benchmarks, data, deadlines, and assigned budgets—along with public involvement and transparency have moved cities closer to achieving their goals on climate and livability.

## **Exploring the value of the global SDG framework**

Since 2015, these plans have evolved. New York City and, subsequently, other cities adopted a broader definition of sustainability than the original one limited to environmental concerns. The new plans have evolved to acknowledge that any form of long-term sustainability relies on sustainable development, with social and economic factors recognized as equally important and deeply intertwined with environmental issues.

The same year, the UN adopted the SDGs. Whether at the city or international level, the same dynamics were at play: a recognition of the value of considering economic, social, and environmental conditions concurrently and the necessity to connect goals across disciplines to make their interrelationships visible, thereby allowing policymakers to get to the root of their issues.

Cities such as Los Angeles, San José, and Orlando, seeking to integrate all aspects of sustainable development into overall goals to be livable and economically vibrant, turned to the SDGs to help them develop a suitably comprehensive plan with clear baselines and an analytical framework to improve internal planning and implementation. As New York City found, this type of systems-level analysis can foster innovation and help synergies to emerge, while the metrics and tracking mechanisms can ensure results.

While all 17 goals are important, the breadth of the SDG framework shouldn't intimidate a city from starting with specific goals that map against their priorities. Some cities use the SDGs as a way to help identify key goals in their community where they want to make an impact. Other cities have benefitted from taking a gap analysis approach to identify areas of particular need that are currently unaddressed in their city's plans. As outlined below, the framework is also effective at different scales, offering the opportunity to align and harmonize policies vertically (up and down government jurisdictions), as well as horizontally (across city agencies) for an urban area.

What are some ways that cities have been using the SDGs already?

### **Leadership and Innovation**

Linking to the SDGs can help city officials and their city as a whole position themselves as global leaders and innovators. The SDGs track closely with attributes describing cities that are magnets for attracting and retaining talent. Cities that are able to show their programs as moving toward SDG targets receive favorable media attention and recognition among international organizations, funders, and peer cities. Cities that are recognized as innovators may attract more interest from startups and tourists, as well as businesses seeking to be located in areas that are looking for features such as good transport, a clean environment, and adequate housing.

BOX  
1

## Box 1: New York City – Leading with OneNYC and a Voluntary Local Review

New York City was the first city to integrate the principles that became the SDGs in 2015. The OneNYC plan incorporated issues of equity, diversity and inclusivity, and growth alongside ambitious sustainability and resilience goals, with the work fully mapped against the SDGs. New York City’s Global Vision, Urban Action visual mapping of city and global targets was the first of its kind, and has been widely consulted and emulated since.

In 2018, New York City once again showed global leadership through its Mayor’s Office for International Affairs by submitting to the United Nations the results of its own Voluntary Local Review (VLR) on its progress towards achieving the SDGs – the first city in the world to do so. While a first iteration of the process, New York’s VLR demonstrated how cities might engage directly with global processes like the Voluntary National Reviews conducted by countries as part of the UN’s annual High-Level Political Forum. The VLR received worldwide recognition, and set forth an example of how a city can advance local priorities while leading on global goals. As a result of New York City’s initiative, global cities like Helsinki, Finland, have committed to submitting their own VLRs in 2019, and several U.S. cities are now exploring how they might conduct VLRs in the years to come to track local programs and learn from each other.

### **Vision-Setting for Long-Term Goals**

City policymakers can test each of the SDGs to see how they might apply to their own city. Each goal can spur brainstorming and the development of an initial vision. They can be the basis for discussion internally, as well as externally in communities and with local organizations. The City of Los Angeles used the SDGs to understand how multiple long-term plans and processes fit together and to identify unaddressed areas between the city’s current sustainability and resilience plans to its programs and goals in preparation for the 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games. [See Box 6] The City of San José used the SDGs to drill into city trends and priorities and reinforce goals on equity and environment across departments with a comprehensive strategy for the future. [See Box 5]

### **Community Participation, Outreach and Consultation**

The SDGs can serve as a launchpad for discussions with stakeholders such as residents, community organizations, universities, city council members, and other elected officials. Such discussions can start a process of identifying priorities and shared values. The SDGs may then be used to build consensus around priorities and values. The sooner a consensus is built around shared priorities, the easier it becomes to initiate and implement—or modify—programs to meet goals and align budgets. Baltimore, San José, and Orlando used the SDGs in this way. [See Boxes 2–4]

BOX  
2

## Box 2: Community Participation in Baltimore, Maryland

In Baltimore, the Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance (BNIA) and the University of Baltimore worked on behalf of the city to host participatory workshops with community stakeholders to discuss which goals are most relevant for their city. Crucially, the BNIA team directed participants to identify the most appropriate indicators to accurately measure these goals in their city. Citizens in Baltimore considered indicators for SDG 8 targets for decent work and economic growth and determined that the most relevant indicator for their city would be percentage of citizens earning a living wage, as determined by the current data within the city itself.

BOX  
3

## Box 3: Inclusive Planning in Orlando, Florida

For Orlando, a city with a large-scale tourism industry and high vulnerability to climate-related disasters, prioritizing sustainability is critical to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of its citizens and visitors. The 2013 Green Works Orlando Community Action Plan was the City of Orlando's initial strategy for working toward ambitious sustainability goals to achieve by 2040. When the plan was updated in 2018, the city capitalized on the opportunity to align more cohesively with the SDGs, connecting their local efforts to a global framework and engaging communities in the process.

The SDG framework highlights the importance of consultation and inclusivity within planning and decision-making processes. Led by the Mayor and Director of Sustainability & Resilience, the city took this aspect of the framework to heart in the 2018 update through an intensive community engagement effort. The Mayor appointed community leaders to a Green Works Task Force. With its local nonprofit partner IDEAS For Us, the city held roundtables on technical topics to identify new strategies and key partnerships for the city. This community engagement strategy became a fundamental aspect of the update, making the plan more responsive and relevant to the needs of the people of Orlando.

The community engagement process, combined with efforts to align the plan to the SDGs, resulted in substantive changes to the Green Works Orlando Community Action plan, including incorporation of standardized data metrics developed by the World Council on City Data and integration of new guiding themes—social equity, resiliency, and smart technology and innovation. These themes “serve as guiding considerations for the development of recommendations” and are designed to be integrated into new Green Works initiatives.

In this way, Orlando is using the SDG framework to identify high-level priorities via an interdisciplinary approach to their decision-making and incorporate the principle of “leave no one behind” that is a guiding feature of the SDGs.

Orlando is seeing the benefits of recent community engagement efforts in the form of creative sustainability initiatives that are only possible due to community involvement. As part of the Fleet Farming program, Orlando households are opting to convert portions of their yards into small farms and gardens. Volunteers plant and harvest produce to sell at local farmers markets. The program’s mission—to empower all generations to grow food to increase local food accessibility—directly addresses SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) while also incorporating aspects of environmental sustainability, social inclusion, and local economic opportunities. The uptake of such a program speaks to the dedication of community members to tackle local sustainability challenges, as well as the city’s ability and commitment to engage with communities in these efforts.

Orlando is an example of how to incorporate the SDGs’ focus on community consultation into the planning process. The city’s efforts to connect with communities throughout the update lent the 2018 update legitimacy and contributed to its effectiveness by increasing buy-in for the plan and new Green Works programs.

BOX  
4

Box 4: The SDGs as an Outreach Tool in San José, California

San José used the update of their Climate Smart San José plan as an opportunity to take a macrolevel vision for the city down to the human level and to engage key stakeholders inside and outside of the government. The Climate Smart team hosted roundtables, using the SDGs as a standard set of goals, to convene community members and government partners. The team has continued to pursue key relationships with partners from Stanford University and the Global Development Incubator to better refine the SDGs as a goal-setting framework to drive impact in the city’s Climate Smart plan.

## Comprehensive Resiliency and Sustainability Checklist

City policymakers can use the SDGs to evaluate ongoing agency programs and initiatives and identify any glaring gaps between activities and goals. The SDGs can serve as a checklist to ensure that a program is working toward one of the goals and not undermining others. With this analysis, agencies and city hall can tweak and adjust to bring their initiatives closer to achieving common goals. The SDGs are an excellent tool for checking that programs are working toward economic, environmental, and social goals in a consistent and comprehensive manner, and that nothing has been missed. The SDGs can be used to check whether budgets match priorities and goals, both within agencies and citywide, and assess whether funds are being used effectively.



### Box 5: Using the SDGs as a “Matrix of Good Reminders” in San José, California

Seated in the heart of Silicon Valley, San José has long prioritized technology, innovation, and setting big goals. The Climate Smart San José plan reflects the city’s values and its ambition. The plan offers a bold vision that puts San José on a course to achieve the UN’s Paris Agreement reductions in emissions while also integrating the SDGs’ emphasis on equity, economic prosperity, and quality of life. San José was particularly keen to demonstrate how the city’s tech culture can be leveraged to achieve better outcomes on key metrics across the city, particularly in the neighborhoods and communities with traditionally lower economic and political power.

Under the leadership of Mayor Sam Liccardo, the city’s Environmental Services Department began to consider the SDG targets as a “matrix of good reminders” for not only the department, but for the city at large. The SDGs also provided a “North Star” for cross-cutting equity issues, such as explicitly planning for gender, race, and economic inclusion from the beginning of program design. The Climate Smart team began to reference the SDGs as a set of common values and mutually reinforcing goals to consider with every policy they put into the plan. The Chief Sustainability Officer appointed a designated senior staffer to head up efforts on the SDGs as part of her role in working across departments to implement the Climate Smart Plan.

#### **Housing: tackling a human-level problem with a multi-sector approach**

The integrated housing policy within the Climate Smart San José plan touches on multiple SDGs: Starting with SDG 11 on sustainable urban communities, it considers marginalized communities (SDG 10) in the creation of good economic opportunities (SDG 13) while being sensitive to the environmental impacts of new construction and urban emissions (SDG 12).

San José's housing policy demonstrates how the Climate Smart Plan reinforces policy goals across city agencies. Housing affordability in San José remains a critical issue, just as it is throughout the broader region of Northern California where San José is located (the San Francisco Bay Area). San José has boomed with the tech industry, though most new land development has skewed toward high-income dwellings. The risk of housing affordability displacing lower income residents has increased, leading the Housing Department to develop programs for communities of all economic levels to continue to live and thrive in the city.

A multi-sector approach informed and inspired by SDGs allowed the Climate Smart San José team to explicitly link their plans to the Housing Department's goals, thereby tackling multiple ambitions at once: increasing affordable housing in the city, increasing transit accessibility, and increasing retail density without causing a large increase in the city's carbon footprint. Climate Smart San José now permits new, mixed-use development areas along designated transit corridors, with retail and affordable housing requirements. It aims to ensure that more people can live in San José and use public transit to move within the city to new economic opportunity zones. The plan also subsidizes solar panels that increase the energy efficiency of buildings, reduce greenhouse emissions, and provide affordable energy for low-income residents. The Climate Smart Plan reinforced the Housing Department's plans and connected them to environmentally-focused city partners to ensure that new buildings would be outfitted with affordable solar energy infrastructure.

BOX  
6

### Box 6: Applying the SDGs as a Unifying Framework for Los Angeles' City Plans

Los Angeles, the U.S.'s second largest metro area, hosts the most active port in North America and is a center of cultural activity. Los Angeles is also set to host the 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games, which Mayor Garcetti has embraced as an opportunity for the city to frame the city's ambitions in a timebound way. Los Angeles has concurrently embraced the SDGs, with their 2030 time horizon, as a globally-recognized and valuable tool to prepare the city for the global stage. Although Los Angeles is among the first U.S. cities to adopt the SDGs, it is no stranger to sustainability and environmental plans. When Los Angeles began considering the SDGs in 2018, the city already had both a sustainability plan and a resiliency plan; further, key priorities have been made public via the Mayor's Dashboard on environmental, infrastructure, and social goals.

To the city, the SDG framework offered a coherent framework to understand how the current plans fit together, identify gaps, and consider new interconnected and interdisciplinary approaches to L.A.'s many challenges, from homelessness and inequality to wildfires and drought. L.A. has used the SDGs as a comparative framework for pLAN and Resilient

Los Angeles and, according to the program director, will consider using the framework similarly in the future as the city considers its new sustainability plan and other emerging policies and governmental priorities.

In implementing the SDGs, Los Angeles leveraged the common language of the goals to create cohesion across the many departments and offices that support the city's vision. Through the SDGs, agencies are better able to communicate and hold themselves and each other accountable to the vision. According to his staff, the goal is for Mayor Garcetti to use SDG language in internal cabinet meetings. Mayor Garcetti and his team have also discussed how they may integrate SDG targets into required reporting for department heads. The budget is being analyzed with an SDG lens; the city is considering how they may eventually reallocate their spending to account for disparities in spending across goals. The city is examining how to take this further by incorporating SDG language into the public-facing data on the Mayor's Dashboard.

### **Building Global Networks and Peer-to-Peer Learning**

The SDGs provide a common language for peers to work together on sustainable development at all levels, including collaborating with their states and regions.

Linking policy initiatives and planning to the SDGs can open up access to an international network of cities and an expanding knowledge base, as well as the possibility of collective action. For cities that are part of the global C40 network, the SDG goals on climate and energy are consistent and show how those issues are in fact part of a broader set of priorities for livable and thriving cities. Since becoming one of the first cities to apply the SDG framework as a tool in their city in 2015, Baltimore and its partners at the University of Baltimore have been widely consulted on their experiences from cities as varied as Medellín, Colombia, Bristol, U.K., and Los Angeles, U.S.

City policymakers can work with each other on specific SDGs to test different approaches. American cities have a long tradition of working together to achieve common aims and to learn from one another. Networks that can support this kind of collaboration include the Urban Sustainability Directors Network and funder-driven cohorts like the 100 Resilient Cities or What Works Cities networks, in addition to the U.S. Conference of Mayors. For any city, there will be priorities that are best met on an intergovernmental level. In states like Hawaii and Connecticut, there are statewide SDG platforms and multi-stakeholder efforts underway.

## **Fundraising**

Philanthropic groups are catalytic partners for many cities as they embark on new analyses and work streams, such as the large-scale, multicity efforts of the Rockefeller Foundation and Bloomberg Philanthropies around resilience and innovation. Some cities have received support from local foundations to launch comprehensive SDG programs. While there are some challenges in obtaining cross-sectoral funding, in many cases foundations may be key enabling partners for cities looking to explore the SDGs. Los Angeles credits the institutional support it received from the Hilton Foundation as fundamental for the city's SDG program, with additional support from SDSN's Local Data Action Initiative to explore data questions around the local implementation of the goals. Many foundations working on urban and environmental issues are already familiar with the SDGs, as are many private sector organizations. Some foundations are moving toward using SDG measures as ways to determine the success and impact of programs they support. Showing how a city's goals match the SDGs and how programs work toward meeting targets and indicators may open up access to new resources from donors interested in seeing the SDGs succeed.

An increasing number of U.S.-based local foundations and philanthropic partners have begun to participate in convenings with groups like the Council on Foundations to jointly take on SDGs, while still continuing to focus on their specific areas of interest. For example, Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors convened a meeting of San Francisco Bay Area stakeholders, including many from private foundations, philanthropic associations, and venture capital firms, to discuss how their sector can best work together to have a wide-reaching impact in the region.

## **Expert Help**

Universities, research centers, and colleges across the country and the world have taken notice of the SDGs. The SDGs are now taught as part of curricula, but they also provide the context for many university researchers to apply their expertise to identify the strategies and conditions to best achieve them. Many cities are taking advantage of this expertise and working with their local colleges and universities. Cities can and do team up with local researchers to find funding for projects in disciplines from the social sciences to engineering that support implementation of the SDGs. These are mutually beneficial efforts, as the city can get expert advice while the researchers produce findings that can be published and help other cities. Researchers often hire students for these projects, who will take those experiences forward into their future careers. Outside of the academic institutions, city residents and subject matter experts also often have special knowledge that can add to initiatives and ensure priorities are aligned.

BOX  
7

## Box 7: Leaning on External Partnerships in Los Angeles, California

At the start of its SDG process, Los Angeles was able to inform its work with the real experiences and challenges from many peer cities. The city proactively convened experts for peer consultation, including “first movers” from local governments, academia, and other partners worldwide.

The city also engaged local universities to ensure these lessons could be made relevant to the L.A. context and to gain support for its sustainability plans. It engaged student teams to conduct sophisticated analyses of budgets, consult with community groups, and gather available data. The students came from a number of U.S. universities, including Occidental College, Arizona State University, the University of Southern California, and the University of California Los Angeles. Upon completion of their research, the teams presented their findings to the city and made recommendations on the issues that were within Los Angeles’ purview, as well as those that would require collaboration with the county and state.

An innovative mapping exercise was also undertaken by university teams. The teams identified city funds being spent on SDG-related targets in order to reinforce the city’s sustainable development objectives within existing budget lines. The exercise had interesting conclusions, such as a relatively large budget for targets under SDG 16 when represented as the city’s funding of public safety services such as the fire and police departments. This kind of analysis presented the city with an opportunity to consider how it might leverage programs in well-funded agencies to also advance key goals that are under-funded, such as services for homeless residents or climate resilience in the face of threats like wildfires.

Considering how cities have already begun to apply SDGs is an important exercise as a city begins to undertake the process themselves. The following section is written to reflect these examples and to offer a pathway forward for cities to work with the SDGs.

# Starting to work with the SDGs in your city in ten steps

To avoid “reinventing the wheel,” a city can start with the SDGs as a guide, saving valuable time and resources toward setting goals and developing strategies. While the SDGs will not all apply in the same way for all cities, they can be prioritized and customized to meet the conditions and requirements for any city. As the examples above demonstrate, the SDGs are a useful complement to ongoing city policymaking, sustainability planning, or urban and economic planning. They can also strengthen efforts already underway and identify opportunities for the future.

While the SDGs can and should be integrated into your city’s existing processes, there are several key stages to ensuring your city will make the most of the SDGs as an analytical and planning tool. Following these steps will help you set up the solid system and mechanisms you will need to achieve the best results.

## **The 10 steps to support sustainable development planning in U.S. cities are:**

1. Setting up the leadership and management structure, including budget and timelines, for the planning process
2. Identifying core values for your city
3. Establishing work teams
4. Assembling baseline data, including population trends and economic conditions
5. Taking stock of what your city is already doing that aligns with the SDGs, identifying gaps, and analyzing those most important to fill
6. Identifying budget resources and potential funding sources
7. Developing a draft framework for the plan, including targets, benchmarks, metrics and indicators
8. Identifying stakeholders, outside advisors (including university and academic partners), and community resources; establishing processes to work with them; and integrating their knowledge and ideas into the drafted plan
9. Aligning budgets and accountability mechanisms, including metrics and indicators, and final reviews
10. Launching the plan while establishing the feedback and accountability mechanisms

STEP  
1

## 1: Setting up the leadership and management structure, including budget and timelines, for the planning process

Preparation is key to success in using the SDGs as part of your planning process. Before you begin the active process, you must build the interior framework on which it will stand. As with a building, planning without a framework (or with a faulty one) risks collapse in the future.

### **Leadership**

Visible buy-in from city leadership, such as the mayor, will ensure that SDG integration with the city's processes is a priority. Related activities could include the mayor presiding at the kickoff meeting for the internal process, regular reviews, budget support for the team, and clear involvement of senior staff at City Hall throughout the process, including the communications and legislative offices. If the process is perceived as not having the attention of the mayor, it will be much harder to involve department leaders who can act to adopt and implement a final set of goals and plan. The process may then languish, and the priorities may not line up with those of senior leadership.

### **Supervising office/coordinator and advisory board**

A lead director or coordinator who has the authority and expertise to manage the process should be designated at the start. Los Angeles, New York, Orlando, San José, Pittsburgh, Atlanta, and other cities have designated stewards for their planning processes that incorporate the SDGs. Offices and agencies that have played this role in cities include sustainability, resiliency, planning, and City Hall advisors.

There are advantages and disadvantages to a management process led from any one of these particular agencies or offices, and the circumstances in each city will be different according to the scope, expertise, and budget available (see "Timeline and budget process" for additional guidance). In any case, this office will require a dedicated budget and resource assistance for the planning to be effective, and this should be established from the beginning.

In addition, establishing an internal advisory board made up of senior members of the administration can help ensure priorities are consistent, identify problems, and remove potential roadblocks. Recommended board members include the deputy mayor and those responsible for operations, infrastructure, social policy, planning, environment, climate, and resiliency. New York City and Los Angeles used this type of structure effectively to streamline and integrate their sustainability policymaking, with Los Angeles also including representation from the agencies tasked with the Resilient Los Angeles plan and 2028 Olympics and Paralympic Games.

## Timeline and budget process

Senior leadership should establish a detailed timeline and budget for this process. Having a firm deadline that the mayor sets will focus the planning process and encourage efficiency. The end goal should be a comprehensive, ready-to-launch plan. In addition, budget and personnel will need to be allocated for the process. Consultants to fill in short-term resource needs may be helpful for analytical work, research, or guidance and logistics on the public process. Funds can be saved by borrowing staff temporarily from agencies for the process duration.



## 2: Identifying core values for your city

### Establishing values and visions

Develop a vision that incorporates the values of your city and its people and prioritizes the issues and areas that require urgent attention. At their best, goals and initiatives embody a cohesive set of values and visions of what a city could be, of a city at its best, at its highest potential. For example, New York City's Mayor Bill de Blasio observed that New York had become a "tale of two cities," with growing income and opportunity disparities. The conviction that this gap was harmful to the city's future became a key organizing principle for OneNYC, which incorporated equity goals and measures to narrow the gap. Agreeing upon the values upfront focuses the development of the goals and provides direction for agencies implementing them in the years to come.

Your city will have its own values and visions for the future. While the SDGs are a great start, the success of your city's plan in the long run requires that the values and visions are grounded in your city's own culture and priorities. These values and visions must be applied to the city itself, molded by the people who live there, and become the city's own. To be most successful, this step should take place before any programs and initiatives are set forth. Carrying out this step will lay a solid, consensus-based foundation, as well as lend cohesion to the overall plan.

Cities can take this on in several ways, and at different points in their process. This process may begin internally with senior leadership and other team members, then be extended to the broader community or specific external stakeholders through open consultation on a draft framework or vision document. Some cities develop a process that loops back multiple times as the effort evolves.

An example is the participatory indicator selection process that the Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance (BNIA) conducted in Baltimore in 2016. That effort, which utilized an existing process to determine relevant local indicators as part of the National Neighborhood Indicators Alliance, ensured that the data selected to monitor progress on the SDGs in Baltimore truly resonated with the community. Cities may decide to convene community-based, grassroots efforts to listen to their citizens or even conduct exercises to develop a shared vision. You can survey residents or reach out to other elected officials and community leaders for their input. These approaches can be combined or done sequentially, and there are advantages to both. In addition to identifying the core values and visions, this process should also include establishing priorities among the menu of options. Whichever way it is done, the final plan should reflect the values, culture, and knowledge of city residents.

There is no right or wrong answer. The only mistake would be not taking this step. And the sooner this process begins to include people outside of the core project team, the better for the quality and integrity of the final plan.

All 17 SDGs will not apply with equal force to every city. For some cities, poverty may be the most important priority, and it may be more urgent in certain areas of the city. Other cities will find that economic development and education are at the top of their lists, while still others may include clean water or air at the top. Baltimore, for example, found SDG 16—focusing on community security, equity, and justice—to be important when longstanding issues of racial equality and policing took center stage in the city. Establishing the values and visions along with the priorities early on will focus resources and time, and lead to better results over the long term.

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### 3: Establishing work teams

Under the management of the lead director or coordinator, having the right members on the team is imperative. Since the SDGs are interdisciplinary and cross-cutting, it is critical for the team to represent the relevant agencies and have a variety of backgrounds and expertise. They should also be competent researchers or have researchers under their direction, and be familiar with working with data for policy planning and tracking. They should also be familiar with city programs and have agency-level expertise on citywide challenges and current initiatives.

### **The senior leadership team**

Ideally all agencies should have a seat at the table, making the senior leadership team a broader set of stakeholders than the internal advisory board, with senior agency responsibilities. The most important agencies to include at the start may be planning, budget, operations, economic development, and climate/environment, but proper planning will also require teams from a city's agencies tasked with data, finance, public health and health care, education, emergency response, transportation, parks, prisons and justice, social services, administrative services, and construction. Communications and intergovernmental relations teams should also participate. The senior leadership team should have enough authority as individuals to speak on behalf of their agencies.

### **Analytical support**

Having the right data and the capability to research and model different scenarios will ensure that you are asking the right questions, identifying the right conditions, and able to fill in gaps in available information about your current sustainability plans. Often analysts for this type of project may already be working within city agencies. They may be your best source, as they will also be most familiar with what your city is already collecting and where to find it. You may need some temporary outside support as well for specialized technical issues or modeling. Local universities and colleges are great sources of expertise and analytical skills and can provide a fresh perspective from their research and modeling capabilities. Stanford University's Sustainable Urban Systems program provided an experimental but sophisticated block-level analysis of San José to the city, which went beyond what the city was ready to do on its own. These types of analysts should be integrated into the effort, and they may also be able to provide ideas as the process moves along.



## **4: Assembling baseline data, including population trends and economic conditions**

Establishing a baseline of data as you launch your efforts will allow you to assess progress toward your goals and ensure resources are spent wisely. Notably, you should assemble key population, economic, environmental, social, and health data as current snapshots and as trends over the last 5 to 10 years. Where possible, trends should be broken down—disaggregated—by community or neighborhood, as well as other categories such as gender and age.

The reports on SDG indicators and city-level indexes developed by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network and the Urban Institute can provide helpful context on what other cities are tracking.

For subject matter content, use the SDGs to frame your questions. The best way to begin this process is through dialogue among expert team members. We can look at SDG 1—eliminating poverty—as an example. Questions you may ask to begin the data collection effort:

- Overall: What would it take to eliminate poverty? What are the forces at work?
- What are the current poverty numbers for the city? By neighborhood? What is a feasible and appropriate target poverty level for our community? What are the SDG targets and how could they apply?
- What is the rate of homelessness?
- How much affordable housing is available?
- What is the unemployment rate? Broken down by age, ethnicity, and other categories?
- What are the major economic sectors in the city? Some examples would be manufacturing, financial services, health care, and real estate.
- Are jobs increasing in any of the sectors? Are they declining?
- Is there a mismatch between available workers for the growing sectors and their needs? What is the pipeline? How can skills be taught?
- What are the levels of hunger? By neighborhood? Why?
- Are there public health issues (such as asthma) that affect some neighborhoods and populations more than others? How are they related to poverty?
- What are the trends over the last 5, 10, and 20 years?

Another topic that comes up frequently for cities is health care availability. In this instance, a city may be looking at a case where Medicaid expansion would be ideal, but another level of government has jurisdiction over that policy decision. Even if a portion of the goal is outside the jurisdiction of your city, such as state- or federally-determined access policies, it is still important to monitor core indicators and how they play out in your city. A city may be able to provide the data and analysis to show the potential impacts of that policy decision on a city and how it may be connected to other goals. Reviewing the core areas will reveal how factors relate to each other and what effective action could look like, and can spotlight key areas for advocacy.

This approach can be applied to any selection of SDGs. A team made up of different agencies and with expertise in different areas can divide the topics and target the efforts according to their expertise. For each SDG, a mix of agencies and expertise will lead to uncovering the most complete data.

Many of these questions will also put you on the right path to discussing other SDGs, such as decent work and economic growth, industry and innovation, and sustainable cities. As you go through the SDGs and begin asking the questions, you can also map where there is overlap to avoid duplicating efforts.

Once you have a draft set of questions, you can pull together the best sources for the data and find where the data may not exist. First, look to your own city sources within departments such as planning, finance and taxation, and health. Beyond the city's own figures, there is a wealth of information available on federal sites such as the U.S. Census Bureau site, the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. These websites have tools that will allow you to search by different categories of interest and over extended time periods. Most states also have good statistical information. In addition, there may be regional authorities, such as those for transportation, that also collect relevant data.

Where there are gaps in the data, you may go to a local university or college for help. University partnerships can produce sophisticated analyses that are delivered outside of your city's designated budget lines or tight human resources, allowing you to gain a level of insight at a low cost. Universities and research centers may already have collected data on your gap areas, particularly if they have a research center on urban issues or sociology. Journalism schools may also have written reports. If your local college or university does not already have such research, it may make a good partner. Professors and researchers in these areas are often very interested in researching what is going on around them, and are eager to provide applied examples for their students. They may work with teams of students through designated research projects, real-world practicums, and capstone projects; in some cases, the university may be able to secure grant funding for such research. The SDSN USA network is actively working to connect local universities to government partners to catalyze these kinds of analytic partnerships and help to contextualize the global agenda to local realities

In addition, think tanks that focus on urban issues may already have relevant research reports. Such centers include the Urban Institute and the Brookings Institution.

Additionally, a local college or university may aid the development of a sound overall research strategy. They would be able to identify gaps, as well as suggest how to fill them. They should also have expertise in modeling, which would allow the city to examine a variety of scenarios with shifting variables to assess the likelihood of success and resources required. Key faculty can bring their expertise to the city and serve as technical advisors for complex policy decisions. Moreover, they may serve as an institutional memory for a process that will take years to complete.

The importance of asking the right questions and obtaining the best possible data will be critical to developing effective strategies, as well as tracking progress toward meeting your goals. Without the right information, a city can waste valuable resources answering the wrong question or failing to track whether an initiative is in progress toward its goals. It makes little sense to develop a strategy and programs and invest in them without also being able to assess whether they are, in fact, working. If the data is showing that you are not making progress, it will

be important to assess where the effort is falling short and why. Your expert agency team members and academic partners will be invaluable for this as well. With such information, it will then be possible to amend or adjust the initiatives to get you back on track toward meeting your goals. This will also ensure scarce public resources are spent efficiently and effectively.

This exercise is closely related to that of establishing metrics and indicators, which is outlined below. The data-gathering process detailed above will help the indicator-setting process go more smoothly, as it will be plain to see what can currently be measured and set up a system that will fill in the gaps during implementation.



## 5: Taking stock of what your city is already doing that aligns with the SDGs, identifying gaps, and analyzing those most important to fill

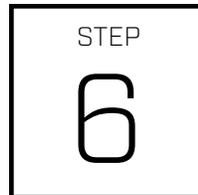
Your city may already be part of other networks and initiatives. You may already have a planning process. You may already have a sustainability or climate plan. There is no need to duplicate efforts; it is best to build upon what you are already doing so that you leverage your resources, time, and efforts wisely. Use the SDGs as an analytical tool to identify gaps and test assumptions about what is possible and thus whether your city is going in the right direction. Then leverage the SDGs to take advantage of expertise, experience, and resources from other cities, foundations, universities, and the private sector.

For the best results, it is a good idea to pull together all the existing plans and plans in progress and conduct a mapping exercise with the SDGs. For guidance, you can refer to resources already developed as part of the SDSN USA Sustainable Cities Initiative, which worked well for Baltimore and San José.

A comprehensive mapping exercise seeks to match existing programs' goals with the SDGs. While tools exist to expedite the process, cities may consider engaging university partners in this step as the mapping is often time- and resource-intensive. The language already in place will not usually match the SDGs but, with a bit of digging into the underlying aims, it will be possible to match the programs and initiatives with the goals. The programs and initiatives may fall under multiple goals upon examination, and multiple programs and initiatives may fit under a single goal. The initial iteration of this exercise may miss some items, which is why it is a good idea to develop a review process engaging the agencies that are represented in the project team. Usually this exercise will take several rounds.

At the end of the mapping process, you will know what your city is already doing to foster sustainable development. You may be surprised at how much is already going on. You will also have a sense of the unrealized potential and how to get there.

This step is closely related to that of identifying the core values. Once the mapping exercise is complete, the core values should be overlaid with the resulting gap analysis from the mapping exercise to assess which priorities and values are missing or misplaced.



## 6: Identifying budget resources and potential funding sources

With the mapping and gap analyses complete and core values identified, the process of assigning preliminary budget figures should begin. Every city will have its own budget and planning processes, which likely include long-range capital planning as well as year-to-year budgeting. These may also involve outside institutions such as a comptroller's office, bonding authorities, and a legislative body such as a city council or assembly. As a starting point, the budget office can work together with agencies to identify what is already funded and what are the sources and legal limitations of that funding. The finance office may also play a role in identifying sources of revenue. This process will need to be revisited at several points throughout the larger process, notably as the final framework is developed. Priorities at this point may also be flagged for their potential to obtain grant funding or receive private support.

The budget and capital planning process and the SDG process must be coordinated for the best results. All should share the same timeline in order to ensure that adequate funding is allocated for priority goals. For example, if a goal on public transit is proposed, it will require substantial capital commitments. It should be flagged as early as possible to ensure other commitments are not made that would preclude such a key goal from being achieved.

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## 7: Developing a draft framework for the plan, including targets, benchmarks, metrics and indicators

With the values established, data and mapping exercises complete, and the budget process underway, all the raw materials are in place to develop a draft framework. This framework would be the precursor to the final plan. This is likely to be one of the most time-consuming parts of the whole process.

Establishing interagency working groups focused on a particular SDG and its indicators, with deadlines and deliverables, are a great way to move the process along at the draft phase. It will be important to ensure all agencies relevant to that SDG are represented and actively participating in each working group. It will also be important to limit the scope of the working groups while holding them accountable to related deadlines, as some groups may attempt to expand their purview. Ideally, there should be several rounds of drafts submitted to senior leadership and the project director, as well as the internal advisory board. This is also a good time to source feedback from other stakeholders such as city council members.

A key part of this development phase will also involve defining metrics and indicators, as outlined below. This process should be linked to the data already available. Even if the data are not available, defining the right metrics and indicators will be imperative. Benchmarks will also mark interim steps toward the target and goals they seek to fulfill.

### **Timelines and deadlines: selecting a time horizon**

In setting your goals and targets, you must determine timelines and deadlines. It may help to divide the goals and targets into short-, medium-, and long-term objectives.

Short-term goals are typically those that can be achieved within one to five years. They may include relatively simple changes in policy, regulation or legislation. They may also include relatively straightforward changes in agency management and priorities. In addition, they may target areas that are already close to achieving a goal, but just need prioritization or incentivizing to be completed more urgently. Sometimes, it is a matter of investing extra funding in a program that works but is currently operating on a relatively small scale. Keep a careful eye out for these opportunities.

Medium-term goals are goals that fall within 5 to 15 years and will be more difficult to implement. For example, the legislation required may be complicated, additional studies may be necessary, additional consul-

tation with multiple stakeholders on a complicated goal may be required, or some infrastructure development may be necessary. Examples of this type of goal are health care services or affordable housing.

Long-term goals are visionary in nature. They typically require more complex and expensive efforts. They may require intensive infrastructure development—for example, a new or upgraded public transit system. They may also require actions by other stakeholders outside the city’s jurisdiction—for example, private renewable energy providers and utilities. In both of these examples, additional permitting processes and extensive funding would also be required. However, these goals are also potentially the most transformative for a city.

For some of the biggest challenges, one method that has worked well for many cities is to set an aggressive, long-term goal that could be met in 20 or 30 years with several interim goals, targets, and benchmarks to keep the implementation on track. For example, many cities have adopted a goal of being carbon neutral by 2050. Cities that have joined the C40 or Climate Neutral Cities Alliance are required to chart their progress with interim targets. Regular and public reporting for these mechanisms also keeps things on course.

### **Establishing scope and jurisdiction: the region**

Cities have differing collections of powers and authorities, and these interact in their own ways with state, regional, and federal authorities and jurisdiction. An obvious area is transportation as some cities own and operate their own transit systems, in others the systems are handled by the state or a regional authority, and in still others it is a combination of all of the above. For example, in Chicago the regional transportation authority Metra oversees commuter lines in and out of the city, while the City of Chicago oversees its own subway and elevated train system.

Energy is another example of multiple and overlapping jurisdictions. For cities to develop climate action plans, they must consider both sources of energy feeding into sectors such as buildings and transportation and energy consumed. Some cities such as Los Angeles own their electric and water utility while others, such as New York, do not. While Los Angeles may be able to contract directly for citywide energy from renewable sources, New York must work with a broad coalition including the state, power suppliers, local utilities, and developers.

These overlapping jurisdictions can make it hard for a city to set and implement its own goals and programs. In some cases, a city can work closely with the other parties but still not have the operating or budget authority to directly implement its own priorities.

A foundational question in these circumstances is whether and how much to include goals that a city itself cannot directly implement. Defining the breadth of a goal is fundamental to setting up programs, finding collaborators, and identifying and employing resources.

Some cities take the position that they will limit the scope of a plan to only those areas for which they can be directly accountable for operations and budget. In other cases, cities include goals that also involve other partners as a way to identify the goal as a priority and mobilize support and resources. Other cities may find a blend is the best option; they can define the problem more broadly while also identifying the initiatives they will undertake to address it and setting up partnerships. Either way, it is an important question to resolve during the planning process as it will affect the scope and budgeting for the plan as a whole. It will also affect how you assess your progress toward the goal. Sometimes showing progress, even with a scope limited to a city's direct jurisdiction, can spur potential collaborators to join in.

Regardless of your ultimate set of choices, it will be important to map out from the start who has jurisdiction over what part of the goal and the systems underlying the ability to reach the goal. This will also reveal potential collaborators, as well as roadblocks that will be difficult to surmount. Looking at agency budgets and their sources of funding will reveal existing partners, whether at the state, regional, or federal level. Similarly, you should also map the delivery structure of existing services and who is accountable for what parts of the delivery.

For example, key actors in the energy sector will include utilities, the companies or organizations that provide them with energy sources to distribute and sell, federal and state regulatory agencies, and federal and state energy agencies. If there are local sources of distributed energy, such as solar energy providers, they would also count. In addition, those who finance energy development in the area would be relevant, be they bonding authorities, banks, or other financing bodies.

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## 8: Identifying stakeholders, outside advisors (including university and academic partners), and community resources; establishing processes to work with them; and integrating their knowledge and ideas into the drafted plan

Any plan will depend on the acceptance and participation of the city's residents, sectors, and institutions. Moreover, they will have specialized information and different perspectives and insights that will improve the quality of the final plan. While relying on the expertise and analytical power of local universities is beneficial to the successful framing of an SDG plan, local stakeholders will be the best experts on their communities and the dynamics that make a city work for them or miss the mark. They can also be champions and allies, and can play a role in assessing progress, identifying roadblocks and detours, and finding resources. It is never too early to begin the process with them.

This can be approached with multiple levels of stakeholders as well as in stages, and different cities have developed their own creative strategies. These range from seeking input when a plan is drafted to engaging from the earliest days before there is a plan (akin to a co-designing process). There are pluses and minuses to both approaches, with one end of the spectrum likely to appear to require less time and be less complicated. However, even if it appears that it will save money and time to keep a public process compressed, it may not. It is not uncommon for drafters to miss key information and priorities, which then can delay the acceptance or adoption of a plan. The range of stakeholder engagement options should be carefully weighed.

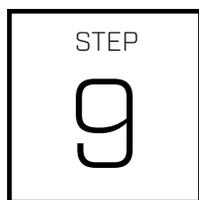
For example, the City of Baltimore consulted the main partners in its SDG analysis, representing the University of Baltimore and BNIA, when they created an update to the city's sustainability plan. The city was able to rely on the community-driven work that had already been conducted by BNIA to extensively map the city's priorities to the SDGs and define key indicators in a participatory manner. Finalized in 2018, Baltimore's sustainability plan explicitly refers to the SDGs and builds off of that existing, community-based work.

In New York, an external advisory board consisting of representatives from major sectors played a key role in the development of the plan. The Sustainability Advisory Board constituted approximately 30 representatives from multiple sectors including health care, social services, energy and environment, labor, real estate, technology, and philanthropy. Regular meetings at key points in the development process allowed the city to benefit from the expertise and wisdom of the advisory board members, and then modify the draft to reflect their input. A particularly productive conference saw the key agency team leaders introduce the draft with its broad proposals to the advisory board, then break out into concurrent, small-group sessions for more detailed discussions. These smaller sessions allowed participants to circulate informally and do a bit of brainstorming, which then led to better ideas upon more follow-up and discussions.

Other approaches include polling, telephone and email surveys, and invitations to share input over social media platforms. Cities also host community information and input sessions—ideally at places and hours convenient to working residents and with childcare. These sessions can also be hosted by an interested city council member or chair of a relevant committee, who may attract a different audience (see Box 3 for a more detailed exploration of the approach championed by IDEAS For Us and the City of Orlando).

Some sectors may benefit from their own sector-specific roundtables—for example, tech, manufacturing, or hospitality. These might also be combined as a private sector-focused discussion. Look to the major employers and industries that make up the city’s economy and include them.

Last but not least, it will be important to include other local governments, elected officials, regional authorities, and the state in the process somehow. This is particularly true if any of the priorities identified may be out of the city’s jurisdiction or require the cooperation and collaboration of other regional entities. In addition, as most city councils have oversight and budget authority, they can be invaluable in assisting the planning process from the earliest stages.



## 9: Aligning budgets and accountability mechanisms, including metrics and indicators, and final reviews

### **Benchmarks, metrics and indicators**

As the saying goes, you can't manage what you can't measure. Benchmarks, metrics, and indicators are vital components of an effective, long-term resiliency and sustainability plan and the entire SDG framework. They point to what is working or not and allow for modification and improvement, thereby improving program performance and cutting waste and expense. As part of a reporting system, they contribute to greater transparency for city residents and stakeholders. They can also promote confidence and trust in the goals as well as a city's efforts toward them.

The very first questions to ask are, "What does success look like? How do you know when you've achieved the goal?" That is what you are measuring. For example, if the goal is to eliminate poverty, measures that could be evaluated would include food security and hunger, how many residents live at or below the poverty level, what is the unemployment rate, how many residents are employed at jobs that pay enough for them to live, and how many children have access to school meals. Depending on a city's circumstances, success on a poverty goal could look like raising the population above the poverty level, which could mean no hunger, access to good paying jobs, and a lower unemployment rate. Or they could be a different mix of components. Every city should develop the definition of success that best fits the conditions in their city.

Benchmarks are the interim targets set to achieve the goals. For example, if a city has an affordable housing goal, a benchmark would be the quantity of units added or retained by a set date—the sum of which, if achieved, would indicate that the overall goal has been achieved. Benchmarks are often aligned with mayoral priorities and visible examples that a mayor's platform is being fulfilled.

Metrics are a set of measurements, typically quantitative, that track performance and assess progress toward goals. For example, a metric for an affordable housing initiative could show the number of housing units built or retained along the way toward a benchmark, such as in an annual assessment. They would show progress toward the benchmark of x number of units to be built within y years or x number of families to be housed within y years. If a city adopts a domestic violence program, a possible metric could be to show a drop in reported levels of domestic violence. However, one thing to be aware of is that sometimes with the establishment of a goal and its program, a metric may appear to be moving in the opposite direction at first.

This may only be a sign that the data before was incomplete or flawed, rather than that a city is moving away from its goal. Or that with the greater availability of citywide services, more incidents (of domestic violence, for example) are now being reported. Metrics are best when they are based in solid data that already exist. Where the data does not exist, new methodologies and research may be required. But this may be exactly what best measures whether a goal is on track.

Indicators are a subset of metrics. They may be quantitative or qualitative. They indicate progress by setting facts within a broader context, giving meaning rather than solely a quantitative measurement. They may be directional, indicating a trend rather than a final quantitative result or measure of a program's implementation. They can be used to describe a process that is implemented. Continuing with the example of domestic violence, an indicator could be the establishment of a public education campaign or training for police on domestic violence. Components would include how many have been reached or trained and by what date. This measure does not show whether incidents of domestic violence are decreasing, but rather steps in an overall program that indicate efforts are moving in the right direction. Another example is air quality. New York adopted the goal that it would have the cleanest air quality of any large U.S. city. Each year, air quality measures are tabulated to show direction. As the sources of New York's pollution in large part originate hundreds of miles away and outside the control of the city, city officials chose this measure as one that would be measurable and significant. This was in contrast to a measure that would track absolute levels of PM 2.5 (a standard measure of particulate matter of 2.5 microns or less) and other contributors to smog, which may or may not show how well a city's programs are doing. Again, the measurement seeks to demonstrate progress in a relative manner—compared to other U.S. cities—to assess progress toward a goal that is not under the complete control of the city. Indicators are useful when it would be difficult to develop a methodology that definitively shows the quantitative achievement of an outcome, or if some portion of a city's goal is not within the jurisdiction of a city to affect. They are also helpful when a quantitative measurement alone does not give the full story.

Metrics and indicators must be measurable, verifiable, and achievable. They should demonstrate the impact that initiatives are having on a goal, as well as progress toward that goal.

A successful set of metrics and indicators will link goals with results. Results can be measured as process as well as impact, though impact is best as these metrics and indicators are the most quantifiable—and often verifiable by third parties. Though quantifiable, an example of a relatively weak measure is how much funding is being spent on a project, as this does not necessarily measure whether a goal is on track to being achieved. However, budget numbers are valuable to show commitment to a goal.

It is critical to analyze components of initiatives and their performance to ensure they are valid and add up toward the benchmarks and goals. While developing the right metrics and indicators can represent a significant investment in time of city staff, they are one of the most important steps toward achieving goals. For the best metrics and indicators, the agencies that will be accountable for the results and managing the programs should be closely involved, as those staff are also typically most knowledgeable about what data is available and what would be required to develop missing data.

In addition, a fixed schedule for collecting and reporting data is necessary. Cities already gather reports and statistics; to save time and money, staff should piggyback on those existing systems. There is no need to reinvent or develop an entirely new data collection system for the most part, but rather integrate the current system with the goals to the extent possible and supplement as necessary. In any case, having regular reporting deadlines for the initiatives allows policymakers to assess whether they are on track to meet the benchmarks and goals. New York developed a system where agencies report to senior leadership on a monthly basis on metrics, indicators, and program benchmarks, and the city publishes an annual, comprehensive update that is available online. Having an internal track, as well as an external one, allows the city to ensure that programs are making progress and, where they are not, to identify early on what needs correcting or adjusting.

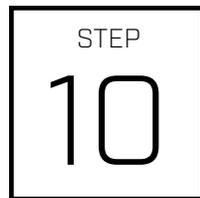
Again, local universities and research centers may be valuable partners in this effort, as academic institutions have a great deal of technical expertise in tracking and evaluating conditions and setting up a research framework to collect the right data. They can also advise on methodology and whether the data to be collected will accurately measure progress. They may also already have databases and existing research that could be used. Networks such as SDSN can provide access to subject matter expertise outside a local area. Local businesses may also be tracking key data, particularly entities such as banks and other institutions.

Helpful resources for setting indicators include the SDSN report “Indicators and a Monitoring Framework for the Sustainable Development Goals” and the U.S. SDG Cities Index from 2017 and 2018. While focused on the national level, these reports suggest indicators for each of the goals. For example, suggested city indicators for SDG 8 (promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth and decent work) include youth employment rate, growth rate of GDP per person, household income, and ratio of employment to population by gender and age group. For SDG 10 (reducing inequality), suggested indicators relevant for cities include percentage of households with incomes below 50 percent of median income and intergenerational socioeconomic mobility.

## Final reviews

As the process gets closer to the deadline for the launch, a final round of reviews should confirm the elements necessary to implement your plan. This stage may take weeks or longer to complete, and at times it may feel like you are putting together an entirely new plan depending on how much has changed before this stage. After a public involvement process, components of a plan may be added, dropped entirely, or radically revised. This will require new budget estimates, and still another round or two may be needed to have the funding issues settled. Accountability for agencies and personnel will need to reflect any changes.

New metrics and indicators will likely be required, or at least modified, and the data systems will need to be adjusted to ensure that the right data will be collected and tracked. Though this may add yet more time, it may also be a good idea to do another round of consultations with key stakeholders and elected officials on any modifications. While it may be tempting to rush through this step, it is vitally important to ensure that the modifications are planned and costed out (as was done in earlier phases), that accountability is assigned, and that the metrics and indicators are the correct ones.



## 10: Launching the plan while establishing the feedback and accountability mechanisms

The plan is ready to be launched, excitement is in the air. The budgets are synchronized and projects are funded. Stakeholders internally and externally have contributed or maybe even designed programs. Agency and other staff accountable for implementation and reporting have been identified. What's next?

The communications and community relations teams, who should have already contributed to the process, should now play a particularly large role. If the plan is to be a living and breathing document, these teams can strategize how best to follow through with related dialogue and engagement, such as through social media or public meetings. For example, the City of New York held a series of community meetings in every community district upon the plan's release and has continued to hold similar meetings on a regular basis, encouraging dialogue at the neighborhood level. Baltimore has a strong, interactive community engagement strategy as well. This is a good time to take advantage of the new social democracy tools that have been created over the last few years and develop an approach that best suits your city's plan and process.

In addition, a digital version of the plan should be considered. Some cities may want to launch their plans entirely on the internet. Both New York and Los Angeles published plans that were user-friendly and navigable for all platforms (phone, tablet, computer) and that effectively used graphics to engage the reader. These sites helped readers easily understand the overall plan, then dive into the parts that interested them most. These cities rejected merely putting the PDF document online as the final step (although these versions are available, as well). The goal with these digital-first approaches was to be the opposite of the usual government report that sits on a shelf and is unread. Instead, they used the best thinking on engaging readers online and telling the story of these plans in clear and interesting ways. You may also want to consider new tools and related research on engaging your target audience, such as gamification.

For smaller cities, your plans may be less extensive or data-heavy depending on availability of data and resources. Your audience may be most easily accessed through informal networks. In these contexts, local colleges and universities may be helpful. These cities are also different in that they may more easily reach consensus on priorities, giving them a leg up on reception versus larger cities. When in doubt, choose the option that makes the plan most accessible and understandable to your city's residents and best empowers them to participate.

In addition, as the plan is ready to go live, all the accountability and tracking mechanisms should be prepared for launch. The agencies by now should be prepared for their roles in carrying out sections of the plan, with personnel assigned and accountable. Data tracking systems should be ready to go live, allowing metrics and indicators to be monitored over the course of the next months and years. For the first year, it would be a good idea to analyze the measures closely to see whether the metrics and indicators are working as intended for program management and adjust them early on as needed to keep things on track.

The most exciting and rewarding part comes after the launch. With clear consensus on the goals, dedicated programs to reach those goals, data and monitoring to track how the programs are performing, and the acceptance of stakeholders, the momentum will be inspiring. Over the course of the next months and year, the initiatives will be established and results will be visible—and with ample opportunity to correct and improve. Over the years to come, as the data and assessments continue to be collected, the initiatives can be refined. And your city will be part of a leading network of cities both in the U.S. and around the world that have charted a course toward greater economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability and resiliency.

## CONCLUSION

The dreams of American cities and the SDGs fit together like puzzle pieces. Both aim high, and both are grounded in the need for results that can be measured.

The 17 SDGs track closely with the high-level aspirations that U.S. mayors have already identified, ranging from reducing (even eliminating) poverty, to ensuring affordable housing, to promoting clean energy and climate, to providing clean water, to safeguarding good health, to fostering innovation and infrastructure. Rather than reinvent the wheel, using the SDGs as a tool to complement city efforts can both inspire and ground a city's comprehensive, long-term planning process.

The SDGs are versatile. As U.S. cities start using them, they see that the SDGs can be used to solidify a vision and mark a city as a leader. Cities can use the SDGs as a tool to analyze how a city's existing programs match up with the aspirations of its leadership. They can reveal gaps, duplication, and opportunities for coordination, as well as budget savings among agencies. They can catalyze discussions with residents and promote engagement. They can be the gateway for cities to bring in experts and additional resources through partnerships with local universities, foundations, and others. They can reveal how systems are interconnected and how to make them work together. Through management tools that track performance and measure results, cities can stay on course toward their goals.

Weaving the SDGs into a city's strategic planning can jumpstart a city's own goals. They can challenge a city to aim higher, as well as marshal the management resources and people to meet those goals. A smart city—one that responds to changing conditions while holding true to the values of its residents, with sound planning and commitment for the years ahead—will bring the livability, peace and stability that is necessary for a city to thrive. It holds the potential to bolster the institution of democracy and provide for sound governance and accountability.

Ultimately, a plan based on the SDGs and geared to a city's priorities, strengths, weaknesses, and culture, with the inclusion and participation of its residents and stakeholders, marks the way forward for a city to live up to the best it can be.

# ANNEX 1: Aligning the SDGs with the U.S. Conference of Mayors

The U.S. Conference of Mayors' (USCM) annual declaration and agenda identifies key themes and priorities. Adopted resolutions focus in on these priorities for the year ahead. At the June 2018 meetings, the key themes were infrastructure, innovation, and inclusion. These themes are closely tied, in particular, to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 11 (Inclusive, Safe, Resilient and Sustainable Cities).

USCM Resolutions 2018	SDG Connecting Goals
Children, Health and Human Services: Food security, opioid programs, maternal and infant mortality	2: Zero Hunger 3: Good Health and Well-being 5: Gender Equality 16: Peace and Justice, Strong Institutions
Community Development and Housing: Restoration of community development block grant (CDBG) funding, opioid/homeless funding, restoration of funding for gap financing affordable housing, opposing increased obligations for federal rental assistance programs, oppose Housing and Urban Development homeless funding cuts, innovations in affordable housing/homelessness, supportive housing; anti-discrimination on housing, vet housing support, "opportunity starts at home" campaign	1: No Poverty 3: Good Health and Well-being 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure 10: Reduced Inequalities 16: Peace and Justice, Strong Institutions
Criminal and Social Justice: Comprehensive approach to substance abuse disorders, assault weapons and bump stock ban, background checks and opposing guns in schools and other gun control measures to protect young people, support community policing, eradicating human trafficking, vacate marijuana convictions, delegate cannabis regulation including medical marijuana to the states and local, opposing federal funding cuts to sanctuary cities, recognizing immigrant contributions, support Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, data protection, maintain public spectrum for emergencies, expedite Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) funds to Puerto Rico, reinstate FEMA's catastrophic Planning Grant Program, support women's rights and voices and opportunities, update member jurisdictions' harassment and discrimination policies, protect transgender under Title IX, protect LGBT rights, work with private sector against hate crimes, releasing community policing funding to sanctuary cities, reverse Department of Homeland Security (DHS) family separation policies, gun control/ban assault weapons and bump stocks and mandatory reporting	3: Good Health and Well-being 5: Gender Equality 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure 10: Reduced Inequalities 16: Peace and Justice, Strong Institutions
Energy: 100 percent renewable energy; support investment tax credit for wind energy/wind energy; support for local commitments to climate, greenhouse gas reductions, resilience, and Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) ruling against required coal purchases for grid, and climate commitments; storage and treatment of nuclear waste onsite and consent-based approach to Nevada disposal and transportation; support energy storage and smart tech /smart grid; support cities working together on new and existing buildings' energy efficiency toward model code requiring net zero by 2050	3: Good Health and Well-being 7: Affordable and Clean Energy 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure 13: Climate Action 15: Life on Land

Environment: 100 percent renewable energy same as above; support Paris climate agreement; nuclear waste same as above; reinstate Superfund tax; support continuation of Clean Water Act standards for vessels in Great Lakes, fund Great Lakes restoration initiative to deal with invasive species; Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to use integrated planning with cities on sustaining water infrastructure costs; and new formula not to burden low and moderate income households; update EPA lead and copper rule for pipes; endorse Edmon-ton declaration

- 3: Good Health and Well-being
- 7: Affordable and Clean Energy
- 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth
- 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
- 10: Reduced Inequalities
- 13: Climate Action
- 15: Life on Land
- 16: Peace and Justice, Strong Institutions

International Affairs: partnerships with private sector against hate crimes; long-term reauthorization of the Export-Import Bank; fund Department of State, Agency for International Development, support Paris and UN, and measure SDG progress; join denuclearization negotiations, fund CDBG and EPA to support cities, join Mayors for Peace

- 3: Good Health and Well-being
- 7: Affordable and Clean Energy
- 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth
- 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
- 13: Climate Action
- 14: Life Below Water
- 16: Peace and Justice, Strong Institutions
- 17: Partnerships for the Goals

Jobs, Education and the Workforce: support Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (same as above); gun control measures same as above; Title IX for transgender same as above; modernize Pell grants, reduce expenses for students, broaden eligibility to certificate and tie to jobs, oversight on indebtedness at institutions, share data; support summer jobs for students with private sector and federal jobs programs; promote national arts in education week; Building U.S. Infrastructure by Leveraging Demands for Skills (BUILDS) Act passage for workforce training for infrastructure jobs; thank all businesses and volunteers who helped after Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria; integrate Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) to combine workforce prep with assistance

- 1: No Poverty
- 2: Zero Hunger
- 3: Good Health and Well-being
- 4: Quality Education
- 5: Gender Equality
- 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth
- 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
- 10: Reduced Inequalities
- 16: Peace and Justice, Strong Institutions

Metro Economies: state and local cannabis regulation same as above; harassment/discrimination same as above; safe and equitable infrastructure development; include art therapy funding for Veterans Administration/military veterans; support Diverse Asset Managers Initiative; support public/private bond financing for public buildings; extend New Markets Tax Credit; oppose citizenship question on census; regional and equitable infrastructure including design-build; support tax exemption for muni bonds

- 1: No Poverty
- 3: Good Health and Well-being
- 4: Quality Education
- 6: Clean Water and Sanitation
- 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth
- 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
- 10: Reduced Inequalities
- 16: Peace and Justice, Strong Institutions

Tourism, Arts, Parks, Entertainment, and Sports: restore availability of fed-local funds for art in transit projects; support for businesses supporting arts for diversity and inclusion goals; support National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities and arts funding to promote local economic development; thanks to Burning Man project for hosting mayors; arts in education week same as above; include urban parks as infrastructure and support access; October as National Arts and Humanities Month; support Blue Star museums with free admission for active duty and families in summer; support cultural equity; support extension of and full funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund

- 4: Quality Education
- 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth
- 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
- 10: Reduced Inequalities
- 15: Life on Land
- 16: Peace and Justice, Strong Institutions

Transportation and Communications: Support prioritizing health policies in cities e.g. tobacco, sick leave, food procurement; standards, funding and resiliency for data systems e.g. internet, storage, protection of infrastructure; fix Highway Trust Fund and support the Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act (FAST); safe testing of autonomous vehicles and local control; local regulation of rideshare and consideration of fee to fund public transit; funding for rights of way for pedestrians and bikes and safe public places, local regulation of autonomous vehicles; protect muni authority on rights of way including broadband versus other utilities; net neutrality

- 2: Zero Hunger
- 3: Good Health and Well-being
- 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth
- 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
- 13: Climate Action
- 16: Peace and Justice, Strong Institutions

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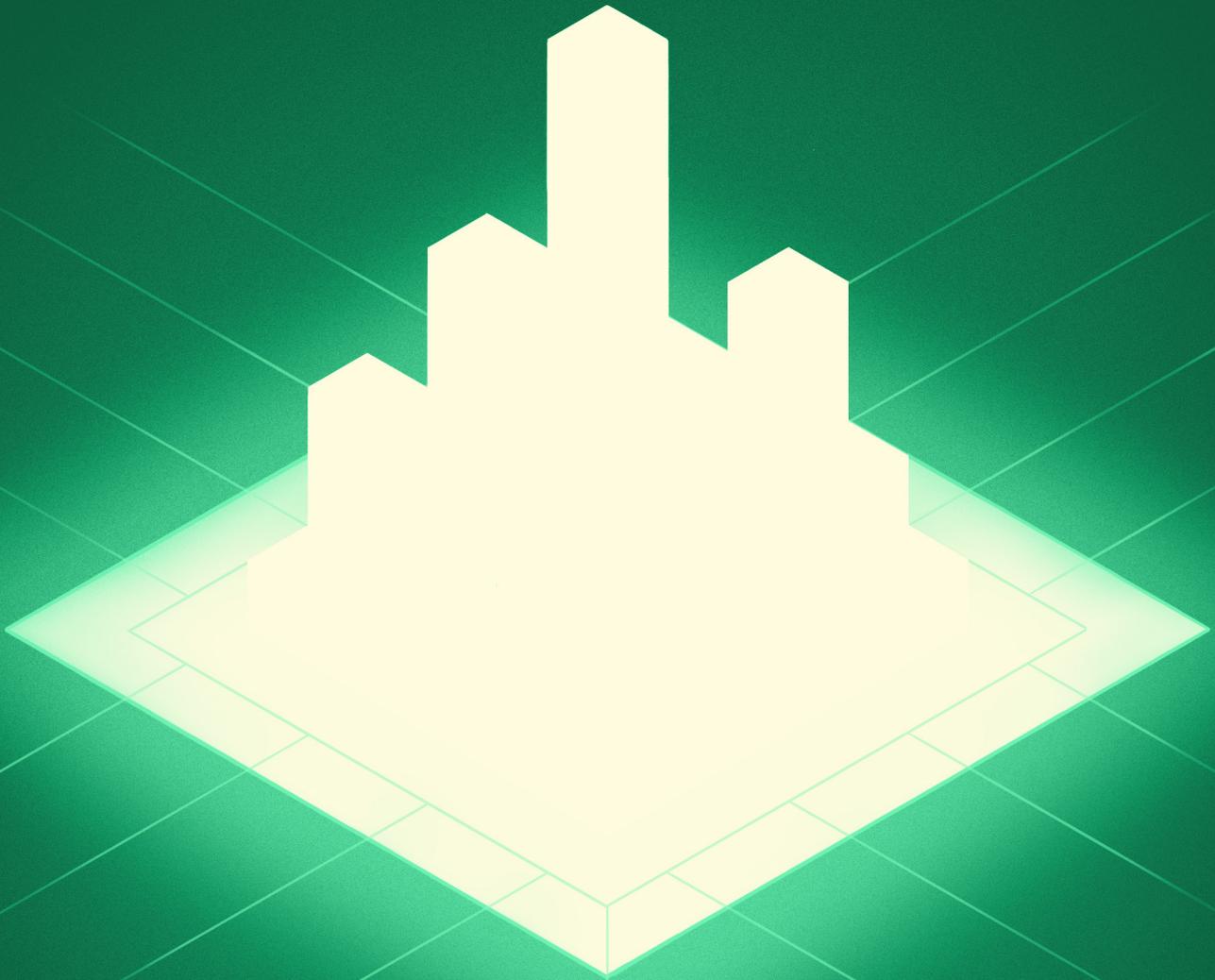
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**A Pathway to Sustainable American Cities:**  
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