

**Summary of Proceedings from the American Planning Association
New York Metro Chapter's 2005 Annual Conference:
New National Challenges • New York Solutions: A Survival Guide for Planners**

Friday, April 22, 2005
Steven L. Newman Conference Center
151 East 25th Street, 7th Floor
New York, NY

“New National Challenges – New York Solutions: a Survival Guide for Planners” is the theme that brought more than 200 local planners and planning students together on April 22nd for the Metro Chapter's biennial conference—judged by attendees to be a rousing success. The speakers and panel discussions were spirited, the breakout sessions were filled to overflowing, and more than 90% of exit survey respondents rated the event as “good” or “excellent” overall.

Individual conference speakers and panelists discussed a cross-section of planning topics related to the shifting priorities and values embodied in the most recent federal budgets. Mitchell Moss of NYU and a panel of distinguished experts set the tone for the day with a thoughtful review of “Federal Policies – Local Leadership: the State of Planning in the Region.” They discussed how a combination of diminishing federal assistance to cities generally, and waning political clout of New York in particular, means that locally planned solutions are more important than ever.

Breakout session panels and individual speakers sharpened the focus of attendees onto components of this larger theme. “Affordable Housing” panelists, moderated by Alyssa Katz of City Limits, grappled with the prospect of shrinking federal support for affordable rental housing in a city and region where rental housing predominates. Panelists in the popular “New York Area Mega Projects” session, moderated by former Chapter President Floyd Lapp, described the implications of reduced federal funding shares for infrastructure, which leaves city and regional planners in the position of having to wring economic growth from a constricted pipeline of large-scale public projects.

An authoritative panel of “security planning” experts described the state-of-the-art in “Protecting our Infrastructure and the Public Realm, Post 9/11” —a session moderated by current Chapter President Ethel Sheffer. This session served as a reminder that traditional planning considerations and sensitivities can, and must, be brought to bear as security plans are developed, or the latest real or perceived security threats will transform our public spaces into forbidding fortresses that offer only a false sense of security.

Despite all the discussion of these real and pressing challenges, the conference was certainly not given over to gloom and doom. Individual sessions highlighted some very exciting new technologies and approaches to planning. Conference participants got a taste of powerful tools that have the potential to engage the public in new ways, and to bring geographically-based information to new levels of integration and utility. These technologies were especially evident in the panel on security planning, and in the

afternoon general session on the “Cutting Edge: New Technological Tools for Planning,” hosted by Gianni Longo of ACP Visioning and Planning.

Presenters at the afternoon session on “Cutting Edge” technologies for planning were drawn from the deep pool of local technical talent. They dazzled the audience with a brief glimpse of what appeared to be the future, but is actually available now on your home or office laptop computer. Inexpensive mapping and modeling tools are now available not only to professional planners, but to the general public. A variety of easy-to-use GIS and real-time community mapping and modeling programs and visualization aids have left the lab and are now as close as your web browser. Attendees go a taste of this remarkable integration of planning disciplines, computing power, and vast on-line community databases.

As we had been reminded earlier during the breakout sessions—particularly those on affordable housing and the excellent retail planning session—planners will need every tool at their disposal if they are to “survive” in a time of shrinking resources and rapidly shifting needs.

Our keynote speaker, Kathryn Wylde of the Partnership for New York City, offered perhaps the most pointed reminders of these tensions in her challenge to present and future members of the profession. She spoke of a coming era of severe fiscal pressures on local and state governments, little hope of major support from the federal level, but optimism for the future of the region. She conveyed a strong sense that despite the risks and difficulties we face, the New York region retains inherent and enduring strengths that are suited to the needs of a competitive world city. While not offering fixed solutions, Ms. Wylde did project a spirit of optimism and hope for the future, and for our ability to plan for it constructively.

In retrospect, it seems that conference attendees did indeed take away the outline of a “survival guide” to the current planning environment.