

Center for an Urban Future

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SIX MONTHS LATER: WHAT HAS PRESIDENT OBAMA DONE FOR NEW YORK CITY?

A week before President Obama took office, the Center for an Urban Future published a report that laid out 51 specific recommendations for what the Obama administration and the 111th Congress could do to help New York City and other cities. Now, at the six month anniversary of President Obama's inauguration, we are taking a close look at which of these 51 recommendations have been achieved. Our conclusion: While the administration still has a long way to go to create a comprehensive national urban policy, it has already made an extraordinary amount of progress on issues that matter to New York and other cities.

OUR JANUARY 2009 REPORT "50+1: A FEDERAL Agenda for New York City" suggested a wide-ranging urban policy agenda for an administration that, both by political inclination and the life experiences of its leader and many top officials, promised to be more sympathetic to the needs and priorities of cities than any since the days of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Following perhaps the most stridently anti-urban White House in memory, New Yorkers and residents of other metropolitan centers eagerly waited to see what the new administration would do.

Some of the proposals in "50+1" we characterized as appropriate for quick action; others, we realized, would take more time. But while we knew when the report was published that 2009 was likely to yield many opportunities as well as challenges, we never expected the sheer volume of federal action that has come to pass during the president's first half-year in office.

Of our 51 recommendations, President Obama and the 111th Congress have taken significant action on 28 of them; 23 of those figure prominently in already-enacted legislation, while seven play a significant role in the president's FY10 budget (some play a part in both). Among these are significant new investments in scientific research, electronic health records, food stamps, microenterprise, and building retrofits. Other measures include bold new regulations governing banks and credit card issuers and a plan, outlined in Obama's budget, to improve access to higher education by shutting down wasteful subsidies to third party student loan companies.

While this represents a lot of movement in just six months, we should also note that a majority of it is tied to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), the $787 billion federal stimulus measure passed in February. A stimulus bill, however effective at creating jobs, doesn't necessarily make for a coherent urban policy strategy. Obama has just now begun to turn his attention to the Office of Urban Policy, renewing his commitment to the agency last week at an urban affairs summit and promising to review how federal policies impact cities. Among other things, he still needs to address Washington's anti-urban funding formula for infrastructure projects and the share of federal transportation spending that goes to mass transit – problems that have persisted through the first months of ARRA implementation. Also yet to be resolved are the ambitious new health care reform and climate change bills, both of which are still working through the legislative process.

What follows is a list of proposals that have seen significant legislative action in the last six months. We used two criteria for inclusion: First, that a piece of already enacted legislation bears on the proposal in some strong way or second, the specific proposal (e.g. 'Pass the D.R.E.A.M. Act') has either been officially endorsed by the president or has passed at least one chamber of Congress. By these standards, 28 of our 51 recommendations qualify, and all but our recommendation on H-1B visas have been furthered rather than hindered by federal lawmakers. The number would have been even higher, if we had included recommendations such as health insurance reform that have been advanced by Obama and already seriously taken up by Congress.

Report - July 2009

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Click here to read the full report (PDF).

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