New York City is one of the healthiest cities in the United States, with a life expectancy that exceeds the national average. This achievement is the result of visionary planning and sustained investment. New York City passed the nation’s first zoning ordinance to separate people from noxious land uses; led the nation’s sanitary movement to bring air, light, and indoor plumbing to housing; and mandated street and waste sanitation. The City built a water supply system that ensures the purity of our drinking water and a public transportation system that substantially reduces our air pollution.

Despite these successes, health challenges remain—and new ones are emerging—that require creative, modern shifts in how the city operates. Many of PlaNYC’s initiatives advance the cause of public health by improving our air, water, and buildings and enable us to live healthier lives, building upon and supporting Take Care New York, the City’s action plan to promote health.

Our goal to achieve the cleanest air quality of any big U.S. city targets one of the greatest threats to public health in New York City: air pollution. Particulate matter from dirty heating oil combustion, vehicle engines, power plants, and other building sources contribute substantially to respiratory and cardiovascular illness and premature death each year. And the burden is borne disproportionately by the city’s oldest and youngest, lower-income, and more vulnerable populations. By cleaning our heating fuels and power supply; expanding public transit access and use; shifting vehicles to natural gas, hybrid, or electric propulsion; and enhancing our natural environment with more trees; we will improve our air quality and reduce the threat it poses to public health. Achieving our air quality goal will save more than 700 lives, 500 hospitalizations, and 1,400 emergency room visits each year.

Cities can be healthier than suburbs and rural communities, but they are also hotter. Our paved surfaces, tarred roofs, and densely clustered buildings retain heat, creating an urban heat island effect; in some cases our city’s temperature can be
up to 7 degrees hotter than the surrounding counties. Climate change is also expected to bring more frequent and severe heat waves. Heat, especially for residents already weakened by illness, age, or immobility, can be deadly. Climate change also threatens to increase the risk of mosquito and other insect-borne illnesses, the frequency and severity of flooding, and the decay of critical infrastructure. We will plan for these emerging threats by studying their impacts, implementing measures to reduce the urban heat island effect, and improving the City’s preparedness for extreme climate events.

A good part of being able to protect and improve our health depends on the choices we make as individuals. Healthy and moderate eating, active living, and regular physical activity prolong both the quality and duration of life. But in some neighborhoods, the opportunities to make these healthy choices are restricted—where access to healthy food or safe exercise and play space is limited.

To improve food access, we will promote the creation of healthy food retail options in targeted neighborhoods, facilitate the development of new grocery stores through land use policy, identify sites with potential for urban agriculture, and encourage the development of community gardens.

We will improve access to quality exercise and play space by targeting under-served neighborhoods with Schoolyards to Playground sites, continuing to improve the quality of sports fields and extending their operating hours, and developing destination-level parks in every borough, on former landfills, and along our waterfront.

We can also improve health in the way we get around our city. By promoting public transportation, pedestrian plazas, safe walking routes, and calming and reducing vehicular traffic, we will encourage more and safer walking and physical activity. By piloting a bike-sharing program, improving bicycle parking, and completing our citywide bike route network, more people will enjoy the health benefits of safe cycling.

PlaNYC sets out a comprehensive plan to make New York’s land, water, and air cleaner and safer. By building a more sustainable city, PlaNYC also advances the goal of maintaining and improving the health of New Yorkers.