



# WNY's Potential as a Climate Destination

Brian Bray, DPA, Personnel Commissioner of Erie County, & MPA Advisory Board Member,

Laurie Buonanno, PhD & Suparna Soni, PhD - Department of Business, Economics & Public Administration

## Abstract

Climate migration is predicted to be a significant phenomenon within the U.S. as individuals and families relocate from areas affected by extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and other environmental risks. Increasingly, Western New York (WNY) is being recognized as a climate haven region due to its geographic and environmental advantages in an era of increasing climate change. As other regions of the US face more frequent natural disasters like hurricanes, wildfires, droughts, and rising temperatures, WNY's relative insulations from such events presents opportunities for growth, population migration, and sustainable development (Weir, 2023). Even the BBC investigated WNY's climate haven claim and found it credible (DeSocio, 2024). As one pundit put it, "Buffalo's weather is going from a punchline to a lifeline." Vivek Shandas, an urban planning professor at Portland State University, thinks Erie County will see large population increases as other parts of the US continue to warm (Deaton, 2019). Consequently, public administrators in regions such as Western New York, which is relatively insulated from extreme climate events, can position their area as a climate haven. Attracting climate migrants, however, will not be solely dependent on environmental factors. Non-environmental pull factors such as affordable housing, job opportunities, and public amenities also play a crucial role. To successfully attract migrants, public officials must understand and enhance these non-environmental pull factors. To what extent can the City of Buffalo and Erie County absorb and accommodate "climate refugees"? What steps must Western New York public administrators take for the region to become a climate destination?

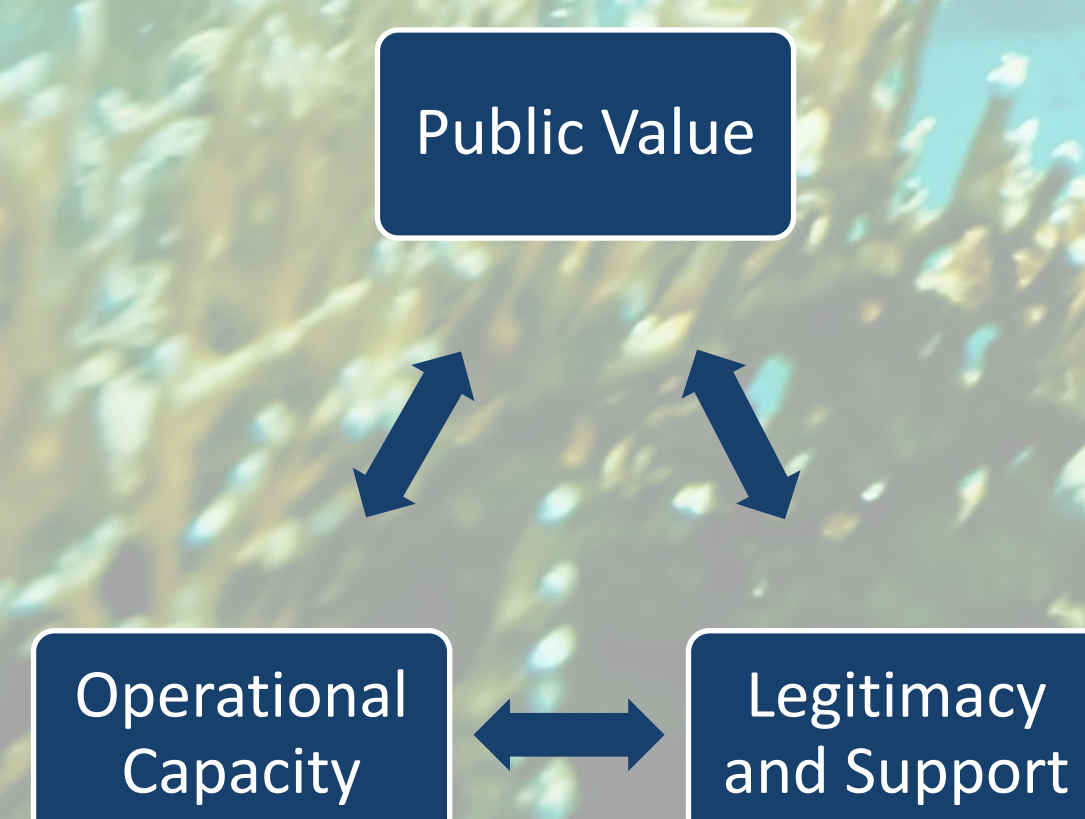
## Conceptual Framework

Public Value Theory, developed by Harvard professor Mark Moore (1995), is used to evaluate whether a government program, policy, or service is positioned for success. It helps public leaders assess not only what is *valuable* to pursue, but also whether they have the *legitimacy* and *capacity* to make it happen. The public value framework is commonly applied in strategic planning and public sector innovation to ensure that new initiatives are both meaningful and feasible.

**Public Value Proposition:** The service or policy should produce clear, tangible benefits for the public (i.e., valuable outcomes for society).

**Operational Capacity:** The organization must have the capability and resources to effectively implement the proposed policy or service.

**Legitimacy and Support:** Policies must have democratic legitimacy and be supported by stakeholders (an authorizing environment that grants permission and resources).



## Research Questions & Methodology

**RQs:** To what extent can the City of Buffalo and Erie County absorb and accommodate "climate refugees"? What steps must Western New York public administrators take for the region to become a climate destination?

Interviews conducted with 30 civil society leaders, public administrators, and elected officials in Western New York to assess preparedness and policy strategies.

## Preliminary Results

### PUBLIC VALUE OF BECOMING A CLIMATE DESTINATION

- Economic Growth and Opportunity
- Increased Property Values and Tax Base
- Cultural and Social Revitalization

Yes, but...

- Fears of losing regional identity
- Growth can come at the expense of existing residents

### OPERATIONAL CAPACITY

**Physical Infrastructure:** Much of the region's physical infrastructure was built during a time when Buffalo was expected to grow into a major metropolis. Mid-century planners designed large-scale systems—roads, water lines, and public works—intended to serve a much larger population than the one that exists today. As a result, the infrastructure is both oversized and outdated. Many systems were constructed under older standards and no longer meet current health and safety requirements. Significant investment is needed to modernize these assets, including upgrading aging water and sewer systems, replacing lead service lines, managing combined sewer overflows, and addressing older homes that are energy-inefficient and contain lead paint.

**Public Sector Entities:** Public decision-making often favors maintaining the status quo over taking bold actions with long-term payoffs. Complex regulations and outdated processes create red tape that slows housing and infrastructure development. Zoning policies in many suburbs still prioritize single-family homes and discourage multifamily housing. After decades of right-sizing to a smaller population, the public sector now struggles to meet current needs and lacks the capacity—such as hospitals and schools—to support future growth and evolving community expectations.

**Amenities of a much larger region:** The region over-indexes on higher education institutions, with a very high concentration of colleges per capita. It is home to NFL (Buffalo Bills) and NHL (Buffalo Sabres) sports teams, and established world-class fine arts (e.g., AKG Museum, Burchfield Penney Art Center) and performing arts (Shea's Performing Arts Center, Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra) institutions.

**Planning and Foresight:** The region lacks a comprehensive plan to manage a significant population influx. However, it possesses strong foundations—large parks, durable building stock, and established public institutions—that position it well for growth. As remote work and online shopping leave office and retail spaces underused, these properties present opportunities for adaptive reuse, such as new housing or community facilities that meet evolving needs.

### LEGITIMACY AND SUPPORT

The concept of Western New York as a climate destination has gained some traction among local leaders who are eager for regional renewal after decades of decline. However, realizing this vision requires substantial state and federal investment, far beyond what local tax revenue could provide. Without a concrete plan linking specific actions to the climate destination goal, broader support may be difficult to secure.

The region's long period of population stability also means residents may be unprepared for the challenges of growth, including pressure on resources and potential NIMBY opposition. Moreover, public officials face a rhetorical challenge: few want to appear to welcome climate change or the displacement of others, complicating efforts to promote the idea openly.

## What outcomes does the region need to achieve to become a climate destination?

- Build more housing to accommodate population growth.
- Improve public transportation and regional connectivity.
- Strengthen infrastructure and climate resilience.
- Attract jobs and economic investment to support growth.
- Strengthen healthcare, education, and public services.
- Change the "Buffalo = Brutal Winters" and the "Buffalo = Rust Belt decline" narratives to "Buffalo = Stable Climate City."

