A Frontrunner City on Urban Transformation

"Frontrunner Cities Initiative: Defining Modalities, Expert Roles, and Transformative Outputs"

As the 2030 deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) approaches, innovative cities around the world are stepping up to lead transformative change. Frontrunner cities are those that go beyond meeting the SDG targets; they set ambitious agendas to innovate, include, and adapt for the future in the face of climate change, economic shifts, and technological disruption. These cities not only localize and implement the global goals at the local level, but also positions themselves as pioneers of the SDGs era, actively shaping the next generation of urban development frameworks and transformative practices.

Introduction

"Being a Frontrunner City" signals the moment at which a city and its community declare their readiness to embark on a fundamental transformation. This status does not mean discarding past achievements or processes but rather re-examining existing capacities, strengths, and opportunities. It is a conscious declaration of readiness to serve as a national and global demonstration site for post-SDG urban development.

A **Frontrunner City** is one that recognizes the importance of revisiting its foundations, reactivating its latent capacities and—through focus, determination, and speed—committing to a disciplined process of capacity building, policy innovation and partnership. In doing so, it establishes itself as a platform where governments, development partners, private sector actors, and citizens converge to co-create a sustainable urban future.

The Core Principle: Building Urban Capacity

At the heart of the Frontrunner initiative lies the **imperative of building urban capacity**. A city cannot become a frontrunner without strengthening its ability to govern, innovate, and deliver for its people. Capacity building is not and add on; it is the very foundation for transformation.

In practice, this means enhancing a city's managerial, social, economic, technical and institutional capacities, so it can effectively respond to today's challenges while preparing for tomorrow's. The Frontrunner framework translates this principle into action by focusing on key ingredients of capacity building:

- **Leadership & Governance** – strengthening institutions, decision-making systems, and accountability mechanisms.

- **Knowledge & Skills** – equipping city officials, civil society, and communities with technical and managerial expertise.
- **Innovation & Technology** – embedding digital readiness, data systems, and innovative tools into governance and service delivery.
- **Finance & Investment** – building the ability to design, access, and manage sustainable financing models.
- **Partnerships & Networks** – linking cities with universities, private sector actors, development partners, and global peers.
- **Community Engagement** – enabling citizens to co-create solutions, strengthening legitimacy and ownership.

This principle is firmly embedded in international development frameworks:

- **UN-Habitat's City Prosperity Index (CPI)** identifies capacity building as a pillar of urban prosperity.
- **The New Urban Agenda** and the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**—especially **SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities)**—highlight capacity building as a prerequisite for urban transformation.

The Frontrunner Initiative builds on these foundations but goes further, making capacity building the defining feature and entry point for post-SDG urban development.

Urban Transformation as Foundation

The concept of **Urban Transformation** is foundational to becoming a Frontrunner City. It compels leaders and decision-makers to:

- Rethink development pathways with a long-term horizon,
- Reassess performance systems to anticipate emrging risks and opportunities,
- Reframe methods and resources to align with future demands,
- Strengthen governance and implementation capacity to remain adaptative and with capacity to innovate.

Frontrunner status is inherently **multidimensional**. It is not limited to rethinking capacities but also involves creating **role models and pilot initiatives** that can demonstrate innovative approaches to development.

Frontrunner status is inherently multidimensional. It is not only about rethinking capacities today, but also about positioning the city for the challenges and opportunities of tomorrow. This

involves creating role models and piloting initiatives that demonstrate innovative approaches to post-SDG development**,** setting precedents that can be scaled, replicated, and continuously adapted in other world's cities.

Dimensions of Transformation

Transformation within a Frontrunner City is not confined to a single sector. Instead, it cuts across all dimensions of urban life through integrated approaches, esnuring that change is systemic, inclusive and future-oriented:

- **Social** – Fostering inclusion, equity, and community empowerment with a focus on gender, youth and marginalized groups.

- **Cultural** – Preserving heritage while embracing creativity and innovation as a driver of identity and cohesion.

- **Economic** – Driving entrepreneurship, resilience, and sustainable growth through green jobs, creative industry, and inclusive economic models.

- **Infrastructural** – Ensuring accessibility, connectivity, and digital readiness, including smart systems, resilient utilities and

- **Environmental** – Advancing sustainability, climate action, and green solutions.

- **Spatial** – Designing livable, inclusive, and future-ready urban spaces that foster belonging, cohesion and mobility

- **Governance & Institutional** strengthening leadership, accountability, and multi-level governance to ensure effective implementation and policy coherence.

- **Knowledge & Innovation** – embedding research, data, digital tools, and innovation ecosystems to guide evidence-based decision-making and adaptive planning.
- **Resilience & Risk Management** – Preparing for shocks and stresses—climate, economic, social, or technological—by mainstreaming resilience in all sectors.

Through this multidimensional approach, Frontrunner Cities create **living laboratories** of transformation. They mobilize diverse resources, align stakeholders across sectors, and translate ambition into action, offering models that can be scaled and adapted to shape the cities of the future.

The Value Proposition: A Unique Opportunity

Becoming a Frontrunner City is more than a recognition –it is a **catalytic opportunity** that positions the city at the forefront of an urban transformation. Frontrunner status marks entry into a new stage of development that opens doors to **innovation, collaboration, and investment**, while accelerating the city's ability to deliver measurable improvements in quality of life.

The Frontrunner Initiative provides:

- **A Global Platform** – Cities gain visibility and legitimacy as national models and global laboratories for sustainable transformation.
- **A Magnet for Partnerships** – Governments, private sector, academia, civil society, and citizens converge to co-create solutions.
- **A Catalyst for Investment** – Frontrunner status signals readiness, attracting development finance, impact investors, and ESG-aligned businesses.
- **A Framework for Action** – The initiative offers a structured pathway—through lenses, dimensions, and projects—that aligns diverse efforts into a coherent transformation agenda.
- **A Replicable Model** – Lessons learned, innovations, and outcomes are shared globally, scaling impact beyond the frontrunner city itself.
- In essence, the value of being a Frontrunner lies not only in what a city achieves internally, but also in how it becomes a **driver of collective learning and global progress**—a place where the future of urban development is tested, demonstrated, and accelerated.

The Essence of Cohesion

The true art of being a Frontrunner City lies in **how this opportunity is used**. The essence of Frontrunner status is the ability to generate broad-based cohesion among economic, political, and social forces.

Such cohesion enables a city to:

- Pursue a **bold urban vision**,
- Unite around a **shared dream** of what the city can and should become,
- And position itself as a **national and global model of transformation**.

Conclusion

A Frontrunner City is not just a place—it is a **movement**, a commitment, a declaration of readiness to embrace change, mobilize partners and pioneer new pathways for sustainable

development. By building capacities, fostering cohesion, and driving multidimensional transformation, a frontrunner city positions itself as a a national model and global laboratory; a place where innovation is tested, progress is accelerated, and future is shaped.

Illustrative Pathways: Frontrunner Cities in Action

Example 1: The City of Lowell as the First Frontrunner in United States of America on Urban Transformation.

The City of Lowell will emerge as a frontrunner city by pioneering a bold, future-focused model of sustainable urban development that extends beyond the current SDG framework. Guided by its rich industrial heritage and transforming it into a foundation for innovation, Lowell will implement Vision 2040, a strategic roadmap that addresses climate resilience, inclusive economic growth, digital transformation, and community empowerment.

Through flagship projects, adaptive reuse of historic sites, and a commitment to clean energy and equity, Lowell will set new global standards for post-SDG urban transformation. Supported by the World Urban Pavilion and the Urban Economy Forum, the city will lead internationally by sharing best practices, showcasing results, and inspiring replication in other cities around the world. This initiative will position Lowell as a national leader in shaping inclusive, sustainable, and future-ready cities.

Example 2: Ten Key projects for potential future collaboration with the City of Richmond Hill as Canada's First Frontrunner City on Urban SDGs.

1. **Urban SDG Park – Kid City**: Creating interactive green spaces and learning environments for children.
2. **Urban SDG & Sustainable Energy Plaza**: Collaborative development with the private sector to integrate public plazas and alternative housing and Urban Sustainable Energy Global Pilot.
3. **Urban SDG Neighborhood**: Holistic community design on Urban SDGs.
4. **Richmond Hill SDG Hub**: Startup incubator and innovation center for SDG solutions.
5. **Economic Empowerment Program**: Initiatives to drive economic growth and advance SDG achievement.
6. **Canada Frontrunner Venture Studio**: Accelerating innovative ventures focused on SDG impact.
7. **Housing and Urban SDGs Initiative**: Connecting housing policies with G7 goals.
8. **Infrastructure and Urban SDGs Mega Project**: Large-scale infrastructure development aligned with SDG principles.
9. **Yonge Corridor Urban SDG Street**: Transforming the Yonge Corridor into a model for urban SDG implementation.
10. **Smart Cities Initiative**: Industrial and high-tech solutions for sustainable urban development.

Windows of Opportunity: Partner Questions and Pathways to Engagement

The following questions anticipate what development partners, investors, policymakers, and citizens may ask about the Frontrunner Initiative. They are framed not just as possible answers, but as entry points for participation. Each response highlights how actors from different sectors can align their expertise, resources, and capacities with the initiative's goals.

Questions section

Category 1 – Investment & Finance

Q1. What investment opportunities does being a Frontrunner City create?

A: Frontrunner status acts as an investment label. Since only one city per country or region is selected, investors see the city as a national laboratory for innovative financial and economic models, attracting national development funds, international development banks, and ESG-focused investors.

Q2. Does Frontrunner status help attract international funding?

A: Yes. Frontrunner Cities are placed in priority for global funding programs, including multilateral banks, climate finance, and impact investment initiatives. The city becomes a preferred pilot site for testing scalable financial mechanisms due to the trust of the frontrunner status.

Q3. What kinds of business models are supported under the program?

A: Innovative models such as Public-Private Partnerships (PPP), Green and Social Bonds, Impact Investment frameworks, and Urban Revenue Models are piloted and adapted to local contexts.

Q4. Will the program deliver financial returns for the city and investors?

A: Absolutely. Projects under the Frontrunner framework are designed for dual returns: sustainable social/environmental impact and measurable financial return-on-investment.

Q5. What type of investors will be most interested?

A: Investors in sustainable housing, renewable energy, creative economy, clean mobility, and urban technology sectors are especially attracted to Frontrunner Cities as natural partners.

Category 2 – Capacity Building & Governance

Q6. How does Frontrunner status strengthen local governance capacity?

A: It establishes new governance capacity through training of local officials, policy exchanges with global peers, and the creation of an Urban Workstation for knowledge transfer.

Q7. What role do universities and research institutions play?

A: They serve as scientific and innovation partners, co-designing and evaluating urban transformation policies and linking global knowledge and research with local implementation and monitoring.

Q8. Could this program conflict with national policies?

A: No. Frontrunner status is fully aligned with national frameworks. In fact, the city becomes a national showcase for implementing government priorities and demonstrating them globally. Strategic partnerships with national governments are central to this alignment, ensuring that city-level innovation complements and reinforces national development agendas rather than competing with them.

Q9. What governance structures are required?

A: A Frontrunner Taskforce is created, combining local government, key ministries, private sector, academia, and civil society. Since the city represents the entire country in the global Frontrunner network, governance must combine local and national capacity through multi-level governance mechanisms.

Q10. How will the program strengthen human resource capacity?

A: Through joint training programs, professional exchanges, and city-to-city learning initiatives. Local talent becomes part of a global urban leadership network based on a tailor made capacity building strategy.

Category 3 – International Branding & Partnerships

Q11. What branding value does Frontrunner status provide?

A: The city becomes the national model of urban transformation and gains global recognition in platforms such as the United Nations, World Urban Forum, and Urban Economy Forum. This branding extends beyond the city, reflecting positively on the country as a whole.

Q12. Can this status enhance international tourism?

A: Yes. Frontrunner status positions the city as a cultural and innovation hub, making it attractive for global tourism, conferences, and knowledge exchange events.

Q13. What global networks will the city access?

A: The city gains access to the Frontrunner Cities Network, United Nations agencies, multilateral banks, global private sector partners, and leading international think tanks.

Q14. Is the Frontrunner brand recognized by investors and entrepreneurs?

A: Yes. It works as a quality seal that builds investor confidence and attracts entrepreneurs seeking reliable, forward-looking environments.

Q15. Will there be opportunities for international partnerships with other cities?

A: Absolutely. Frontrunner Cities collaborate through joint projects, twinning partnerships, and cross-investment initiatives with other global frontrunners under the Urban Economy Forum.

Category 4 – Urban & Economic Transformation

Q16. What priority areas of transformation are included?

A: Urban economy revitalization, sustainable housing, historic core regeneration, clean mobility, renewable energy, and digital/tech-enabled services. Each city identifies a signature theme as its national innovation model and urban transformation integrated project.

Q17. Is this program only for large metropolitan cities?

A: No. Frontrunner status is also designed for small and medium-sized cities, provided they can serve as a replicable model for other cities nationally and globally.

Q18. How does the program align with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

A: It is directly aligned with SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities), SDG 8 (Decent Work & Growth), and SDG 13 (Climate Action). The program operationalizes SDGs through practical city-level projects.

Q19. Is this mostly symbolic, or are there real projects on the ground?

A: It is both symbolic and practical. While global branding provides recognition, pilot concrete projects ensure real transformation that is scalable to other contexts.

Q20. What changes will citizens experience in daily life?

A: Better quality of life, new economic opportunities, improved public spaces and services, and a stronger sense of belonging to a city recognized as a global leader.

This is a call for action. The Frontrunner Initiative invites partners, investors, governments, and communities to join in shaping the next generation of cities—future-ready, inclusive, and sustainable. Your expertise and engagement will turn opportunity into transformation.