

Volume 74, Number 55 | **May 25 - 31 , 2005**



*Villager photo by Elisabeth Robert*

Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Councilmember Margarita Lopez — at Tuesday’s announcement of plan for the Lower East Side waterfront — have a bipartisan relationship going on.

## Mayor unveils details of Lower East Side waterfront renovation

By Josh Rogers

Niki Azure, 85, used a cane to walk to Pier 35 to hear the mayor talk about the city’s plan to add playgrounds and make other improvements to the East River waterfront, but she remembers when it used to be a place a fun.

“I played on the boats — they were my playground,” Azure said after seeing the presentation. “I used to jump on the boats and take the bananas.”

Councilmember Alan Gerson, a few decades younger than Azure, also knew the waterfront as a place to get into trouble, although he had a different experience. “When I was growing up, the waterfront for the most part was a dangerous, dank, dirty place where you went to do no good — I never went there but that’s another story,” he said.

Both liked the city’s \$150 million plan that goes from the Battery to East River Park.

Azure, a lifelong Lower East Side resident who now lives at Smith Houses, said the proposal is “absolutely fabulous.” Most of the East River esplanade area near her house is blocked with chain-link fencing and she avoids going to the waterfront benches because the walk around the fence is too long. She was happy to hear fences will be removed and about other planned improvements, though she doubted whether she’d ever see it. “This will not be done in my lifetime,” she said.

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The money comes from the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation and the plan is expected to take three to five years to complete. It includes widening the bikeway-walkway of the esplanade, which will also have new plantings and benches, adding lights, pavilions and traffic sound mufflers under the F.D.R. Drive, adding marinas and boat-launch areas at Pier 35 near Rutgers St. and at Pier 15 and the New Market Building (expected to be vacated by the Fulton Fish Market in July) near the South St. Seaport, and building plazas and play areas at Piers 15 and 35 and along Pike and Allen Sts.

Mayor Bloomberg said five “places where the waterfront slipped into the street grid,” namely the streets known as Burling, Peck, Catherine, Rutgers and Montgomery Slips, will all be improved. Burling Slip will become a playground, answering a concern of Community Board 1, and the latter three will become plazas filled with trees, cobblestones and benches. The current plan for Peck Slip calls for a small reflecting pool/ice skating rink, although Paul Goldstein, district manager of C.B. 1, said City Planning officials have told him they may make adjustments to Peck Slip since some board members have suggested the reflecting pool may not be the best use for needed open space.

City officials and architects with the plan’s design team, SHoP Architects, Richard Rogers Partnership and Ken Smith Landscape Architect, met several times with Community Boards 1 and 3 and made adjustments to the plan as a result.

“We are very happy with the plan,” said Goldstein. “They responded well to our ideas.”

For example, City Planning originally wanted to connect the Hudson and East River esplanades in the first phase of the plan by moving an entrance to the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel 350 feet and building a bikeway-walkway in front of the historic Battery Maritime Building. Board 1 supports the idea, which also includes a plaza in front of the building, but feared the \$65 million price tag would drain too much from the rest of the plan.

But Amanda Burden, chairperson of City Planning, said connecting the esplanades remains “an essential element” of the plan. The \$150 million includes \$7 million for planning and designing the reconfiguration of the Battery Maritime Building area and City Planning hopes to get the rest of the money from federal transportation funds.

A wider, southern entrance to East River Park will be created by removing existing barriers in front of Pier 42. Eventually, the city hopes to demolish the pier with its dilapidated building and replace it with grassy berms and a riverside sand beach. Unlike piers, the berms are designed to allow marine life to thrive. The city will need environmental approvals and money for this part of the plan.

In the meantime, Gerson said, the next battles will be to get indoor community space at Pier 42 and in part of the large Sanitation building on Pier 35.

The elevated F.D.R. has long served as a barrier to the East River waterfront and made it more difficult to make improvements there. A Downtown Alliance business improvement district-C.B. 1 study a few years ago concluded tearing down the drive would be too expensive and cause traffic problems. The groups recommended closing a few lanes to create an elevated walkway. Board 3 also opposed taking down the F.D.R., feeling it would increase traffic on local streets.

The city last year suggested closing a few lanes to create room to build residential towers through the middle of the highway. The revenue from the towers would have paid for additional park space over the river, but both community boards rejected the idea and the city let the air out of the trial balloon.

Instead the area under the F.D.R. will have better lighting, sound mufflers and pavilions for retail stores, arts groups and community space.

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“This plan uses the F.D.R. Drive to provide a canopy for new cultural, commercial community spaces along the entire waterfront,” said SHoP’s Gregg Pasquarelli. Pasquarelli previously said the Pike/Allen St. plan would create the “Champs Elysées of the Lower East Side.”

Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, who sued the city 16 years ago to block a prison barge from going to Pier 35, and Councilmembers Margarita Lopez and Gerson have been strong supporters of the city’s East River plan

“This will be the most awesome area [that’s] ever been seen in Manhattan,” Lopez said.

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*The Villager* is published by  
Community Media LLC.  
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