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'The other waterfront' becomes a contender

By Lincoln Anderson



Villager photos by Elisabeth Robert

Whether the F.D.R. viaduct in Board 3 should be lowered to ground level is being studied.

A ground-level F.D.R. Drive, a floating Chinese cooking school, a historic ships flotilla and Basketball City are just a few of the ideas being proposed to revive the long-neglected Lower East Side waterfront.

On the West Side, the Hudson River Park project has been a tremendous success and a model of providing access to the waterfront. But the East Side waterfront lags far behind with poor access and few, if any, amenities to attract people to venture across South St. to the river.

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But that imbalance could soon be lessened. As part of Mayor Bloomberg's effort to revitalize the city's waterfront, the administration is studying how to improve the waterfront between the south end of East River Park and Battery Park.

Two months ago, the city's Economic Development Corp. issued four separate requests for proposals for the East River Waterfront Development Study, with responses due last month. The different R.F.P.'s address a range of issues from urban design and traffic to marine ecology.

Community Board 3, which includes half this stretch — from East River Park to the Brooklyn Bridge — has been actively involved through its new Waterfront Task Force, which has been meeting regularly.



Pier 42 at the south end of East River Park is in a state of disrepair.

At the same time, however, low- and middle-income residents in nearby housing developments, fearing gentrification of the waterfront, are gearing up to oppose commercial uses. A proposal backed by the city and Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver for Basketball City at Pier 36 (see article, p. 21) is shaping up to be the first skirmish.

Last Wednesday, C.B. 3 held the first in a planned series of public meetings to share information and get community input on Board 3's part of the study area. Perhaps due to a chilly rain, only about 20 people showed up for an informative discussion.

Wilbur Woods, director of the Waterfront and Open-Space Division for the Department of City Planning, gave a historic overview. Before the Second World War, the waterfront between East River Park and the Brooklyn Bridge had 25 working commercial piers, he said. But with the

advent of containerized shipping, more space was needed for offloading the containers and shipping operations moved to Staten Island, Brooklyn and New Jersey.

What remained was a lot of vacant and underutilized piers. The city has used these to locate uses residents don't want nearby, like Department of Sanitation garbage truck garages.

"That's something we didn't question back in the 1970s, '80s and into the early '90s," Woods noted. "But in the '90s we started to look at it as part of a comprehensive waterfront study."

According to Woods, the city's current waterfront revitalization plan focuses on four areas: increasing public access; preserving fish and wildlife and improving water quality; encouraging water-dependent and working-waterfront uses; and promoting residential development.

Since entering office, the mayor has stated his desire to improve the city's shoreline. A year ago Bloomberg announced his Lower Manhattan Initiative, which targeted the Lower East Side's waterfront for a makeover. At C.B. 3's public hearing last week, Robert Balder, director of the Mayor's Office for Lower Manhattan Development, reaffirmed that the Lower East Side waterfront "represents one of the best opportunities to make a public investment that will fulfill the goals of the city's vision."

The Lower East Side's three piers are being studied for ways to increase recreational and other neighborhood uses. Pier 35 at Rutgers St. is an empty, open, wooden pier with a collapsed area in front that needs repair. Just to the north, Pier 36, running three blocks to Montgomery St., includes a Sanitation garage on two-thirds of it, plus facilities for police, E.M.S. and the Mayor's Office of Emergency Management. Pier 42 at the south end of East River Park, is vacant and needs repair.

In general, this section of the waterfront is "a long stretch without any programming," Balder said.

Plans for piers

Balder was enthusiastic about the possibility of opening up an existing 12-ft.-wide walkway on the east side of the Sanitation garage pier and incorporating it into the bikeway ringling Manhattan. A third of Pier 36's large pier shed building is used by O.E.M., which came in after 9/11. But there is a memorandum of understanding that they'll leave, Balder said. During his powerpoint presentation, Balder couldn't show a slide of the O.E.M. facility's interior, noting it was "sensitive stuff." It's in this space Basketball City hopes to open a new facility.

At Pier 42, a former banana pier, with a 200-ft.-by-600-ft. pier shed, the

city had to evict the tenant and recently spent \$750,000 to keep it from collapsing into the river. Like the larger Pier 36, Pier 42 is a platform supported by steel "H" piles, which are rusting after 50 years. Balder said it would cost \$15 million to \$20 million to repair the pier.

He said other general improvements could include trying to find a way to remove the chain-link fence and Jersey barriers under the F.D.R. viaduct, "without having people wander onto South St.," and improving lighting.

Also, he said, Councilmember Alan Gerson had emphasized adding ferry connections from the Lower East Side to other park areas, such as the new Brooklyn Bridge Park and Governors Island.

In addition, just to the south in Community Board 1, Balder noted, the Fulton Fish Market is to relocate to Hunt's Point in the Bronx in a year. Since fish deliveries to Manhattan aren't made by water anymore, but by truck, relocating the market will reduce the trucking and congestion that occurs at nights and early mornings around the Fulton Market, he said.

Balder and Woods both vouched that the East River has gotten much cleaner due to sewage treatment.

Balder said things are looking good in general on the project.

"The timing is quite ideal," he said, noting it's "what the mayor wants to do" and that there's "tight collaboration" between the various agencies involved.

Board 3's Waterfront Task Force has identified several areas for short-term improvements, including better crosswalks and creating more openings in the barriers and fences under the F.D.R.

Lower East Siders have long wanted a traffic light installed on South St. at Rutgers St. but have repeatedly been told by the Department of Transportation that the spot doesn't meet requirements. However, a D.O.T. official at the meeting noted that if a park or other uses are developed on the east side of South St. that bring increased activity, chances are good they'd get a light at Rutgers St. Other possibilities might include pedestrian bridges and tunnels, he added.

Residents' fears

However, local residents who spoke at the meeting expressed concern over potential gentrification and commercialization of the waterfront.

Rocky Chin, a former candidate for City Council and a Gouverneur Gardens resident who is on the board's Waterfront Task Force, warned the waterfront could become a "battleground."

"There are low-income and working people," Chin said. "It's not like the West Side. We don't want to become just like a gentrified community."

Natalie Hon, the Two Bridges Neighborhood Council's urban planner, said any redevelopment plan should emphasize that "the local community is the group that should get the most access to the waterfront." Hon expressed the council's concerns about Basketball City, which charges \$10 to play basketball, saying that "local youth are just secondary" and "just a footnote" in the proposal. "This project should allow free access," she said. Annual median income of residents in the area between the F.D.R., Pike St., E. Broadway and Grand St. is only \$21,000, she added.

Anita Ramirez, another local resident, said too many local youth are hanging out and getting into drugs or having babies early and need a healthy alternative.

"The Boys' Club on Pitt St. closed down," she said. "What else is there?" She said she could envision a McDonald's "with a beautiful playground" on the waterfront as a positive attraction.

A member of Asian Americans for Equality said a community garden would definitely draw people to the waterfront.

Carl Briseno said he was Operation Sail's harbor manager in 1992 and had worked on the waterfront since he was 20.

"I worked Pier 42 when it was carrying bananas," he said. "I worked Pier 36 when it was carrying coffee." Briseno said the waters around the piers are calm and deep enough for historic vessels to dock there.

"My plea is to keep it open for maritime use," said Briseno, a Knickerbocker Village resident.

Afterwards, Hon and Vicki Amter, Two Bridges Neighborhood Council's treasurer, said other uses local residents have mentioned include a pool, farmers' market and ice-skating rink. Ideas coming out of AAFE's Rebuild Chinatown Initiative, Hon said, have included a floating Chinese restaurant and cooking school.

The city will assemble a Lower East Side Waterfront Consultant Team in the next month or two and come back to the community to do research, Balder said. Over the next year, a concept plan will be formulated. The concept plan will be followed by an environmental impact study, which will include a uniform land-use review procedure (ULURP), which will require that the plan come back to Board 3 for community input.

Summing up Board 3's position on the waterfront, Harvey Epstein, the board's chairperson, told The Villager, "We want it to be open for active recreational use — and that's our goal. We're not looking for commercial

uses, we're looking for recreational uses. Bike paths and parks, green space, access to the water, ferry terminals and shuttling back and forth to Brooklyn and Governors Island — there are so many options out there. We're not looking for 30-to-50-story commercial or residential buildings.”

Epstein said although Community Board 1 to the south supports taking down the F.D.R. viaduct in its district, Board 3 hasn't taken a position whether the F.D.R. in its district should be lowered to street level.

“Obviously, there are traffic issues,” Epstein said. “Would it mean more traffic for us?”

As for Basketball City going into Pier 36, Epstein seemed to express some support in saying, “Something's going to be there. We want some recreational space.” However, he said it will be up to board members to decide when they vote on the issue at the Nov. 18 full board meeting.

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