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09/27/13--20:07: Queens in the Crosshairs



On August 30, a group of workers and small business owners in Willets Point, Queens, launched a hunger strike in advance of a City Council hearing on development plans that will force the removal of 250 mostly immigrant-owned auto-body shops and scrapyards, and the more than 1,800 workers they employ, from the neighborhood. Their eviction would pave the way for a 1.4-million-square-foot shopping mall and entertainment center backed by Sterling Equities, the owners of the New York Mets baseball team.

The mall, which would rise next to Citi Field and become the largest in New York City, has the backing of the Bloomberg administration.

"This plan, Bloomberg's plan, is almost criminal," says Sergio Aguirre of the Willets Point Defense Committee. "They make this mega-plan for rich people, for rich developers and private owners of big business corporations, and Bloomberg gives the land to them, and he kills our businesses, our jobs, our form of living."

The Willets Point mall is only one part of a cluster of overlapping development projects that city officials have targeted for northwestern Queens in recent years, says Arturo Ignacio Sánchez, an urban planner based at LaGuardia Community College and longtime member of Queens Community Board 3. Other initiatives include the expansion of the U.S. Open Tennis Center in Flushing Meadows Corona Park, a proposed 25,000 seat Major League Soccer stadium, and the construction of Flushing Commons, an \$850 million complex of retail, luxury apartments and office space in downtown Flushing.

Meanwhile, on the westernmost edge of Queens, large-scale construction is transforming Long Island City, once an important hub of urban manufacturing, into an area dominated by luxury condominiums, office towers and high-end retail stores stretching from Hunter's Point and the waterfront area along the East River to Court Square and Queensboro Plaza.

Rippling Outward

"So you have these two growth poles," explains Sánchez, "and these are two planning anchors that are coalescing." According to Sánchez, city planners have sought to direct real estate investments into these areas, creating the conditions for rising land values to ripple outward, and eventually for the growth poles to converge. Facilitated by successive waves of rezoning and historic districting, signs of gentrification expanding through northwestern Queens have been evident for some time. And now, in the waning months of Bloomberg's administration, city officials are racing to push through large-scale real estate projects that could have a profound impact on the future of the borough.

In March, with mega-development projects in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park and Willets Point under city review, City Councilmember Julissa Ferreras (D-East Elmhurst) announced plans to form a massive Jackson Heights-Corona Business Improvement District. This would be a public/private partnership that would require property owners to pay an additional tax for services, from increased garbage collection to district marketing to the installation of surveillance cameras, that Ferreras says the city is unwilling to bring to Roosevelt Ave., a bustling commercial thoroughfare that runs beneath the elevated tracks of the 7 train between Long Island City and Flushing.

"The current problems on Roosevelt Avenue hurt everyone," says Ferreras, citing safety issues, poor lighting and cleanliness. "This is why I believe a Business Improvement District is a solution to this problem."

Critics, however, argue that the plan is designed to raise property values and commercial rents, remove street vendors and displace the dense network of family-owned immigrant businesses that line Roosevelt Ave, thereby creating the conditions for high-end chain stores to gentrify the neighborhood and accomplishing a major step in the process of convergence described by Sánchez.

If approved, Ferreras's plan will expand an existing two-block BID in Jackson Heights, known as the 82nd St. Partnership, into one of the city's largest. It would span from 81st to 114th St. along Roosevelt Ave., incorporate retail shopping areas along Junction Blvd., Corona Plaza and National St., and end at the edge of Flushing Meadows Corona Park. Encompassing more than 1,000 businesses, the BID would run through the heart of social, commercial and public life in Corona, Elmhurst and Jackson Heights, some of the most ethnically mixed immigrant neighborhoods in the world.

Big BIDness

First introduced in New York City during the fiscal crisis of the mid-1970s, BIDs are associations of property owners who pay special assessment fees for private services they deem beneficial to enhancing a business environment. Over the years, BIDs have been used to draw affluent consumers back to the city by remaking urban public space into a quasi-privatized, highly-regulated zone for consumption, modeled on the suburban shopping mall. Once a BID is formed, all property owners within the BID's boundaries are required to pay yearly assessment fees. Frequently, the property owner's assessments and additional tax burden, incurred as property values increase, get passed on to their commercial tenants. With more BIDs than any other U.S. city, New York currently has 67 BIDs, a third of which were formed during the Bloomberg administration.

In Corona, Elmhurst and Jackson Heights, immigrant small business owners, street vendors, students and community leaders have formed the Roosevelt Avenue Community Alliance (RACA) to oppose the BID. On September 8, they held a lively rally in Corona Plaza before marching to Julissa Ferreras' district office, an event that drew coverage from the *New York Daily News*, NY1, DNAinfo.com, and several local Queens papers. Organizers estimate that around 100 people attended the rally, which included a cultural performance with live music and spoken word.

"Today, along with other small business owners, we are leading a campaign against raising rents along Roosevelt Avenue," shouted Freddy Castiblanco, owner of Terraza 7, a bar and live music venue in Elmhurst, to a crowd that gathered at the rally. "Our concern is that the BID will put small businesses at a competitive disadvantage to corporate chain stores, and that we'll get displaced."

Protesters also rejected Ferreras' argument that a BID was necessary because of competition from a future Willets Point mega-mall.

"We are not competing with the mall because we don't have the things the mall has," said Leticia Ochoa, a student and member of Vendedores Unidos, a street vendor organization on Roosevelt Ave. "We already have three malls nearby. If they really want to improve the community, they should start by investing in after-school programs for kids."

Opposition

Community opposition to the Jackson Heights-Corona BID is having an impact. The proposal to form a BID will be voted on by property owners and commercial tenants in the affected area. Seth Taylor, the executive director of the 82nd St. Partnership who is leading the effort to install the Jackson Heights-Corona BID, is overseeing the vote, which had initially been scheduled for August, but has had multiple setbacks and is now expected for early October.

"So the way it is looking right now," explained Taylor, "is because of the concerns that people in the community have been raising we are sort of taking a step back and wanting to do some more meetings."

According to Taylor, discussions are now underway to reduce the BID's proposed boundaries and annual budget. "The boundaries are likely going to be smaller, and the budget is going to be decreased by quite a bit," Taylor said. "Again, this is all in response to the concerns that we've been hearing from some members in the community."

But critics of the proposed BID say that the changes won't help and that Taylor's aggressive advocacy for the BID has rankled some community leaders. David Rosero is a property owner and member of Queens Community Board 3 who, along with Rubén Peña, a business owner and community activist in Corona, was initially supportive of the BID and served on the BID's steering committee. When Rosero and Peña raised concerns about the BID's impact on the neighborhood, concerns they were hearing from their own constituencies as community representatives, Taylor removed them from the steering committee.

"He didn't tell me anything, any email, any kind of note, he just erased me off the steering committee," said Rosero.

PowerPoint presentations given by Taylor have claimed that the "majority of the board must be property owners and commercial tenants," according to a slide from a presentation that has been shown at community outreach meetings. Taylor's claim is at odds with New York City Department of Small Business Services' regulations, which state that property owners and commercial tenants are distinct categories of stakeholders and that the majority of a BID's Board of Directors must come from the minority that actually owns property and stands to gain the most from a wave of gentrification moving through the area.

Make the Road

Despite the inherently undemocratic nature of the Board of Directors, Make the Road New York, a prominent community-based organization whose Queens office falls within the boundaries of the BID, has inherited a seat on the BID's steering committee.

"Our interest and perspective in participating in it is to be able to represent the entire community, street vendors included," said Daniel Coates, lead organizer with Make the Road.

But Rafael Samanez, director of VAMOS Unidos, a street vendor organization that is opposed to the BID, disagrees. "Community organizations should not support projects that overwhelmingly promote the interests of large corporations over small businesses and street vendors," he says. "Organizations like VAMOS Unidos have throughout the years felt the effects and the pressure from BIDs as they always move to severely cripple street vending in communities where they are formed."

Make the Road's stance has helped legitimize the Jackson Heights-Corona BID as being representative of the interests of the community even though it has been unpopular with members of Small Business United, a project established by Make the Road "to elevate the voices of small business owners from New York's vibrant immigrant neighborhoods."

"In two meetings the members of Small Business United were unanimously opposed to the Jackson Heights-Corona BID and the main concern was the rent increase and the standardization of some of the most diverse neighborhoods in the world," says Castiblanco, a member of Small Business United.

When asked how Make the Road could succeed in their stated goal of creating a more inclusive BID given that the majority of directors will be property owners, Coates seemed vague about the details, saying, "I am not totally sure what the full composition of the board is."

RACA activists and supporters have vowed to continue to oppose the BID, insisting that the affected neighborhoods already have more than enough resources to develop the community in a way that does not displace small businesses or local residents.

"The economic situation now is very critical, with high real estate taxes and high unemployment. The rent for the businesses and residents is extremely out of hand, so how can a BID operate under those conditions? Peña asked.

Meanwhile, even supporters of the BID remain uncertain, saying that many business and property owners in the affected area are still uninformed about the BID.

"I'll be honest with you," says John Ferreira, President of the Junction Boulevard Merchants Association, and currently a member on the BID's steering committee. "On Junction Boulevard as much as we've gone to the stores and given them information, I still think there are a lot store owners and a lot of landlords that are not up to snuff on the meaning of the BID ... or how the BID is going to work."

Marty Kirchner is a community and labor organizer in Queens. He is a member of the Roosevelt Avenue Community Alliance.

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