

Â UNLIKELY ALLIANCE WINS APPRENTICESHIPS FOR PUBLIC HOUSING RESIDENTS

After three years, an unlikely alliance of public housing residents and several building trades unions have won a significant victory. The New York City Housing Authority has agreed that \$600 million of construction work in public housing over the next three years will be built by union contractors. At present, almost none of the housing authority's work is built with union labor. In exchange, the carpenters, painters, laborers, and plumbers have agreed to hire approximately 220 residents of public housing during each of those years. In addition, the housing authority has increased enforcement of "Section 3" requirements - a section of the Housing & Urban Development Act of 1968 which requires that federal public housing funds be used to hire local residents and subcontractors - for contractors working on public housing.

Like many community activists in African-American and Latino neighborhoods, many public housing resident leaders have had a strong sense of the historic racism in the construction unions. And in neighborhoods like Harlem, there is a significant history of overlap between public housing resident organizing and groups like Harlem Fightback, which led the effort to open up the unions.

But over the past several years, these groups have found common cause, as part of a coalition called TRADES - Trade Unions and Residents for Apprenticeship Development and Economic Success - originally created as part of the Alliance for a Working Economy, and now a campaign housed at New York Jobs With Justice, a labor/community coalition. The trades unions have long been shut out of almost all of the construction paid for by the New York City Housing Authority. Workers on these federally-funded projects are supposed to be paid the "prevailing wage" - locally-calculated wages which are several dollars above minimum wage and which often match the union scale. However, because there is little enforcement on many publicly-subsidized projects, the unions documented pervasive prevailing wage violations on housing authority jobs.

Residents were equally upset about the housing authority's failure to insure the implementation of the Section 3 requirements. At a City Council hearing in 2001, residents documented job after job with no resident employment. Driven by these common interests, union leaders (especially from the Carpenters, Laborers, and Painters Unions) and public housing leaders - including leaders from the NYC Public Housing Residents Alliance and from Public Housing Residents of the Lower East Side (affiliated with the community organization, Good Old Lower East Side) - worked over several years to overcome differences and build a strong alliance. In August of

by {ga=blander}

Monday, June 30, 2003 12:00 AM

2001, the groups together led a rally of 2,000 people over the Brooklyn Bridge to a housing authority hearing. After this, the housing authority began meeting with TRADES representatives in 2002, under the new leadership of Chair Tino Hernandez and General Manager Douglas Apple.

The TRADES Coalition is still, in many ways, a fragile one. While the New York City Housing Authority has reached an agreement with the building trades unions for the \$600million contract, public housing leaders in the TRADES Coalition remain frustrated that they were not at the table as well. But residents credit the Carpenters for bringing the housing authority's proposal back to the full group, and the unions have agreed to residents' requests for a specific target for public housing residents hired on these jobs. Public housing residents are looking forward to the jobs that will be created. The building trades unions hope this will be a model for other publicly-subsidized construction work which is currently non-union. And Jobs With Justice (TRADES' sponsoring organization) hopes that if alliances can be built between trades unions and public housing residents, many more labor-community partnerships are possible.

MIXED REACTIONS ON THE BROOKLYN WATERFRONT

Following upon recently approved rezonings for Park Slope and East Harlem, the New York City Department of City Planning released its initial rezoning plans for the Greenpoint/Williamsburg waterfront earlier this month - to a mixed reaction in the community. City Planning's proposal includes an enormous upzoning of the waterfront, currently zoned for manufacturing use with buildings one to three stories tall, to allow for the construction of residential towers up to 30 stories tall. The plan preserves manufacturing or mixed-use zones in many areas, although it reflects a significant reduction of the land reserved for manufacturing. And it would provide for public access to the waterfront and "contextual zoning" -- zoning with height limits and appropriate features to fit into the existing residential communities (see [Rezoning the Williamsburg and Greenpoint Waterfronts](#))

Neighborhood activists - especially those in the [Greenpoint/Williamsburg Waterfront Task Force](#), a coalition of over 70 community organizations - were pleased last month when the Bloomberg administration announced it would oppose the 1,100 megawatt TransGas power plant on the Williamsburg waterfront (although this is not the death knell for the power plant, which could still be sited there despite the City's opposition).

by {ga=blander}

Monday, June 30, 2003 12:00 AM

The New York Times reported nearly universal support for the city's plan ([City Seeking to Rezone Brooklyn Waterfront](#) , June 19, 2003) and there is certainly support amongst many residents for the outlines of the plan. But community organizations and residents are far more mixed than has been suggested.

Some are opposed to the height limits proposed for the waterfront, believing that 15 - 30 story towers are out of scale with a community where most buildings are four stories or fewer. Other groups, including Neighbors Against Garbage and the New York Industrial Retention Network, are concerned that the plan undermines the viability of manufacturing in the community, despite the carve-outs for many existing manufacturers (see Zoning to Kill Manufacturing, and the Assault on Greenpoint, the May Gotham Gazette Land Use [column](#) , and [Zoning to Protect Manufacturing](#)).

Perhaps the most common concern is that, despite repeated use of the words "affordable housing" in City Planning's presentation, the rezoning is likely to lead to housing that is far beyond the reach of most community residents. The vast majority of the "upzoning" is along the waterfront, where apartments in residential towers with Manhattan views will fetch prices well over \$2,000 per month. City Planning is proposing that developers be allowed to build the large towers "as of right," with no requirements or zoning incentives for affordable housing. They claim developers will choose voluntarily to apply for programs as part of the mayor's "New Marketplace" housing plan. But developers will receive a 15 year tax exemption, even if they build luxury housing. Many community organizations in the area - including St. Nicholas Neighborhood Preservation Corporation, Los Sures, Neighbors Against Garbage, and a clergy coalition led by Neil Sheehan - are calling for more aggressive efforts to ensure that a meaningful portion of the new housing built is affordable to local residents. Local City Councilmember David Yassky has called for "inclusionary zoning," which would allow developers who create affordable housing to build larger buildings than those who don't (see [Waterfront Housing for Everyone](#) , by David Yassky, and [Inclusionary Zoning, and Tool for Low-Income Housing](#)). Yassky writes:

"Once again, the city is helping developers who will see the value of their property skyrocket. I propose, in the future, requiring these developers to commit to making 20 percent of new residential construction affordable for a typical family in the development neighborhood. Unused manufacturing land represents some of the last stretches of vacant land in the city. Unless the city intervenes, there is no guarantee that any low and moderate income New Yorkers will be able to live in any of the thousands of new apartments developed on these vast tracts. We cannot afford to ignore this opportunity to build affordable housing. The residents of New York City, not just the wealthy ones, deserve a chance to reap the benefits from the development of

by {ga=blander}

Monday, June 30, 2003 12:00 AM

the Brooklyn waterfront."

City Planning's proposal still has a long road ahead. The Environmental Impact Statement is in the works, and City Planning hopes to certify the plan by the end of the year, after which there is a six month process of hearings before the plan goes to the City Council.

PUTTING NEIGHBORHOOD PLANNING BACK INTO HOUSING

In July, the NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) will announce a reorganization, establishing a high-profile Division of Neighborhood Planning as part of its Office of Development. Ironically, it is largely the need to respond to a revitalized real estate market that has led to the need for enhanced neighborhood planning capacity. For the past decade, most of HPD's work in neighborhoods has consisted of turning city-owned, abandoned housing stock (taken by the city for non-payment of taxes) over to for-profit and not-for-profit developers, or to the tenants. This did not generally require a broader look at the neighborhoods, since the department was the primary owner of the buildings being transferred and renovated.

But the city has stopped taking over property through tax foreclosure, and abandonment is down significantly from the 1970s and 1980s. This presents a challenge for the department in implementing Mayor Bloomberg's housing plan, [The New Housing Marketplace](#) (in pdf format), which was announced last December. (See Gotham Gazette's [critique](#)

of the plan.) Land and property to develop as affordable housing has become far more scarce. So Housing Preservation and Development is establishing a new planning unit to work with community organizations and developers to package sites. This involves not only looking at general uses, but in reaching out to many significant landowners, both public (New York City Housing Authority, NYC Department of Education, Health & Hospitals Corporation) and private (Catholic Charities, hospitals, etc). HPD will then work with communities and developers to identify and assemble parcels for the development of affordable housing under the mayor's plan.

Brad Lander is the executive director of the Fifth Avenue Committee, a community development organization in Brooklyn.

Trade Union/Public Housing Alliance; Reaction to Rezoning Of Brooklyn Waterfront; New Neighborhood P

by {ga=blander}

Monday, June 30, 2003 12:00 AM
