by Brad Lander
Wednesday, November 19, 2003 12:00 AM -

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Letitia James, who succeeds James Davis on the City Council representing district 35 , which covers Clinton Hill, Prospect Heights, and Fort Greene, has a long history of supporting community development. Even before she officially took office, she was able to score two victories for affordable housing, including a promise by Housing Preservation and Development Commissioner Jerilyn Perine to support the transformation of "The Brig," a former prison on Flushing Avenue, into an apartment building.

But James also faces a significant challenge: how do deal with " development, development, development," as Jennifer Gerend, executive director of the Myrtle Avenue Revitalization Project, puts it. A series of major developments are taking place throughout the district. "Tish's challenge will be to balance development interests and the many differing community viewpoints on proposed development, rezoning, and preservation," says Gerend. "Many residents are excited about some amenities to be added from the major developments, but still want to preserve the local, neighborhood feel of the Fort Greene/Clinton Hill community. We basically want to have it all."

James says that she is not against development, but that it must meet the needs of her constituents. Any major housing development, she says, must provide "a fair share of housing for people at the community median income, or at least the [New York] City median," rather than the median for the metropolitan area (including Nassau & Westchester Counties), which is far higher. In addition, "we've got double-digit unemployment" in the public housing developments in the district, so developers must provide skills-training as well as jobs.

To achieve these goals, James hopes to use "project labor agreements," like one that she helped to negotiate for the Tappan Zee Bridge, that require unionized construction with apprenticeship programs for local residents. Another idea that James discussed during the campaign is negotiating with developers to sign " community benefits agreements ," legal documents that stipulate how the development will benefit the community, in areas including jobs, community services, environmental improvement, and affordable housing Community benefits agreements have been used increasingly by community organizations and unions, especially in California.

But Steve Aronson of the Pratt Area Community Council wonders whether, even with these types of agreements, there really is "room for everyone." Will developers - especially Brooklyn mega-developer Bruce Ratner, who is involved in most of the major development projects - really be forced to make significant concessions, or will they basically

get what they want, in exchange for a few goodies they would have provided anyway? And how will these agreements, which are notoriously hard to monitor, be maintained and enforced.

These questions will be answered in a multitude of development projects moving forward in Fort Greene and Clinton Hill:

Downtown Brooklyn Rezoning: Within the next few weeks, the Department of City Planning will certify its proposal to rezone downtown Brooklyn, in order to encourage the development of additional high-rise office, residential, and educational towers. Deputy Mayor Daniel Doctoroff argues that New York City needs space for many more office jobs to remain competitive in the decades to come. While many community members would welcome more jobs and housing in downtown Brooklyn, some fear the additional traffic. Others wonder what steps will be taken to ensure that good jobs are truly accessible to local residents, that the housing is affordable to local families, and that new schools are created that will not only meet the needs of the new families but provide better options for local kids.

BAM Cultural District: As reported in this column in April, negotiations are underway between the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) Local Development Corporation and the Coalition of Concerned Citizens, over the corporation's $700 million plan to create a cultural district, several pieces of which are already underway James hopes that the negotiations will lead to an agreement, so that the cultural district can move forward in a way that is satisfactory to the Coalition of Concerned Citizens, which fears that new housing, commercial, and cultural development will price out local residents and change the character of the community.

High-rise infill development: The Fort Greene Association and the Clinton Hill Society and others are gearing up to push for expansions of the existing historic districts, and perhaps also for "contextual zoning" that would provide height limits, in order to block high-rise infill development projects taking place "as of right." Residents recently lost a battle to prevent the development of a 15-story residential building, adjacent to four-story brownstones, on Greene Avenue and Carlton Place.

Atlantic Center: Construction is nearly complete on the last major commercial component of the Atlantic Center Mall - which developers, residents, and the city have been fighting over

for more than 50 years. Over the next year, on the site where several generations of Brooklynites once hoped the new Dodger Stadium would rise, there will be several new tenants - Target, Bank of New York and Red Lobster. For this development, developer Ratner received $114 million in "Liberty Bonds" provided by the federal government to New York City - the first project (inside or outside of Manhattan) to use these tax-exempt bonds.

Ratner's Arena: The biggest fight about development is the arena proposed by Bruce Ratner for the New Jersey Nets and the New Jersey Devils, which would be built over the Long Island Rail Road yards across from the Atlantic Center mall. Ratner's $500 million proposal, which would be designed by renowned architect Frank Gehry, also includes commercial stores and 5,500 units of housing. The development has the support of Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz, who has long been angling for a professional basketball team in Brooklyn.

But James, along with Assemblyman Roger Green and State Senator Velmanette Montgomery, opposes the project, on the grounds that it would create too much traffic and congestion. Opponents also include the Prospect Heights Action Coalition, which was created last year when residents came together in an attempt to block the siting of a homeless shelter in their community. James says that any stadium in Brooklyn should be built in the Navy Yard, perhaps as part of the city's plans for the Olympics.

Other community development advocates believe that the proposed site - at the crossroads of almost every subway train (the third-busiest hub in the city) and the Long Island Rail Road - could be a good location for the arena, but only if a "community benefits agreement" provided for good, unionized jobs for Brooklyn residents, and for more than 1,000 units of affordable housing.

Ratner recently submitted the highest bid to purchase the Nets, $275 million, $25 million more than the bid that included U.S. Senator Jon Corzine . But the bidding for the team - like the bidding for the future of the neighborhood - has only just begun.

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