

Finding Balance on the Brooklyn Waterfront

by Kimberly Miller

Friday, April 29, 2005 12:00 AM -

Although we have more shoreline than practically any other metropolis in the United States, most New Yorkers are strangers to their waterfront. The development of industry and the advent of highways along the water's edge have combined to block us from our city's best asset.

Vibrant, diverse communities need affordable housing, public open space and distinctive urban design. A delicate balancing act is required to turn these simple ideals into realities. The place to renew this equilibrium is along the East River in north Brooklyn.

In Greenpoint and Williamsburg, factories, warehouses and vacant lots block the waterfront, depriving residents of access to some of the best views in the city. The city's current rezoning plan for the area seeks to correct this and envisions bringing people back to the waterfront.

The plan calls for new affordable housing, parks and a 1.6-mile esplanade along the river. Private developers would build the residential buildings and adjacent sections of the waterfront esplanade. To finance this esplanade, developers would build larger than usual buildings with more apartments to sell or rent.

This might seem like a great deal: Without spending a dime of public money, the city gets waterfront access. But this model of development just doesn't work. Across the Hudson in Jersey City, citizens have been waiting for the completion of their privately-funded public waterfront esplanade for more than 25 years.

Where separate, distinct sections of the esplanade have been built in Jersey City, public access is often difficult or restricted, and the large buildings form barriers between the neighborhood and the water. The kinds of activities and facilities that make a public waterfront inviting -- fishing, kayaking, playgrounds, food vendors, boat launches -- are shunned by private developers because of liability risks. Jersey City taught us a lesson in imbalance. Why make the same mistake in Brooklyn?

The precedent we fear is already being set. At one development known as Schaefer Landing, now under construction south of the Williamsburg Bridge, there will be two paths to the waterfront. One will connect to the luxury condominiums and will always be open. The other will be from the street and will be locked at dusk.

The rest of Brooklyn's waterfront could be developed the same way. Even when the waterfront is built out, inland residents of Greenpoint and Williamsburg may find themselves locked out of Independence Day fireworks over the East River.

Now is the time to envision the future for this 1.6-mile stretch of East River shoreline. The City Council will vote on the rezoning plan as early as Monday, May 2. If the mayor and the council can work together to budget funding for the waterfront during this rezoning process, the city can begin acquiring the land now and setting a schedule for immediate development. A recent editorial in The New York Times suggested that the city "build the entire promenade,

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guaranteeing public access and uniform maintenance."

The city can get a jump start on its legacy by creating a local parks conservancy to help implement the vision, manage its development and raise funds for the esplanade and other area parks, like nearby McCarren Park. By removing some parcels of land from the rezoning and reserving them for new open spaces, both Greenpoint and Williamsburg will see benefits now and in the future.

Making an upfront investment in the city's waterfront can bring the whole project back into balance, free up developers to invest more in affordable housing and reduce the need to build towers soaring to 40 stories. By making north Brooklyn's waterfront public, we can ensure that local residents never have to pine for their native shores. This rezoning can give these neighborhoods something they have never known -- a truly public place at the water's edge.

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