

Bloomberg's obsession with [West Side Manhattan development](#) and Brooklyn Councilwoman Letitia James' objections to the proposed

[Nets Stadium](#)

(In PDF format) are both big-time community development issues.

But most such issues play out in individual neighborhoods. And with crime and the crack epidemic on the decline, the popular belief that the public schools are improving, and with white and middle class people actually throwing elbows to move into once forsaken neighborhoods, community development is increasingly seen for its added economic value to the middle class, and less for who it might be leaving behind or displacing.

Following are three of the issues on the minds of the electorate this political season.

New York's Real Estate Boom (or "Help: I can no longer afford to live here")

A woman I know, formerly of Fort Greene, is living the up side of what has become an all too common story in the Big Apple. Having bought what is generously called a two bedroom apartment looking out on Lafayette Avenue six years ago for \$155,000 — a price she feared at the time was inflated - she recently sold it for \$630,00 to a young woman with a healthy trust fund. "Personally, I don't think it's worth it," my friend comments. "There's too much noise on the street outside of the apartment. And yet now, I can't even afford to live there myself."

Speaking with the new real estate savvy she's attained, she explains that the level of home seeker desperation has risen in areas like Fort Greene because "there's just no inventory left".

Affordable housing in New York is hard to find and at a premium. Community activists and vulnerable residents have been grumbling for years about the transformation of neighborhoods across the city in which rents and sale prices have gone through the roof and low-income people are finding themselves priced out of areas where they've lived for generations. What's perhaps most striking is that neighborhoods all over the city which were once seen as unrecoverable pockets of poverty and blight, like [Red Hook](#) for instance, are now [hungrily looked upon](#)

by developers and yuppie settlers alike.

[A report by the Center for an Urban Future](#) (In PDF Format) noted that the Mayor of New York has considerable power in controlling housing production and community development through his authority over zoning and land use, building code changes, appointments to the City Planning Commission, among other things.

But on the neighborhood level, where gentrification battles are most intensely fought and are as much about emotionally charged race- and class-based land claims as they are about residential or commercial change, most politicians are studiously agnostic on the question of what kind of development befits their neighborhood; when they offer their opinion on the subject there are too few “right” answers and simply too many opportunities to piss people off.

As a result, for better or worse, it’s far more difficult for voters to hold politicians accountable for their position on gentrification. Take Harlem, one of the most high profile community development battlegrounds in the city. With middle class and non African Americans pouring in, glossy commercial development pushing small businesses off of 125th Street, and [Columbia University creeping around its borders](#)

, politicians have no choice but to acknowledge the tension between those who want Harlem to dismantle the legacy of poverty, and those who denounce the changing complexion of area residents and commercial corridors. But few will offer a clear vision of what Harlem should look like. Recently, city council candidates who vied for Harlem’s District 9 city council seat, in response to questions about proposed development projects, criticized the community review process undergone by recent community development projects and declared that as candidates they seek “

[responsible development](#)

” – arguably one of the most meaningless and non committal terms in civic discourse.

Large Scale Corporate Neighborhood Development (Or “But what if I don’t want a highway running through my backyard?”)

The question of whether to allow the proposed building of land grabbing sports stadiums and box stores has given rise to this year’s highest profile community referendums.

The Forest Ratner proposed development of [21 acres in Brooklyn](#) , which includes the Nets stadium, housing and commercial development, became a rallying cry for opponents of [eminent domain](#)

, which represents the government’s ability to seize property needed for the completion of a

public project.

But more than anything else, outer borough projects like Ratner's stadium plan and the Ikea store which is now destined to arrive in Red Hook, are important because they pit two distinct camps against each other: On one side you have those who champion job creation or who define economic progress as upscale development; on the other side you have residents and business people who will likely be displaced or who object to the inevitable traffic congestion and other environmental implications..

The Nets Stadium was originally cast as government teaming up with big commercial interests to literally bulldoze over small, defenseless residents and small businesses. But Ratner and Ikea were both able to win overwhelming support from local elected officials by offering huge buy-outs to residents and enticing folks with jobs, particularly the public housing populations of Fort Greene and Red Hook respectively. Both the Nets Stadium and Ikea battles took on racial and class dimensions as predominately white, middle class activists found themselves being shouted down by African American residents from the projects demanding jobs.

In the end, most city wide and local elected officials (with the exception of Tish James) opted to support Ikea and the Nets stadium rather than risk being perceived as obstacles to neighborhood economic progress. The Nets stadium first demonstrated its city-wide profile as Public Advocate contender Norman Siegal joined with residents to fight Ratner's plans, but Virginia Fields and Gifford Miller, along with Bloomberg, were strongly in favor of Ratner's economic development vision. Ferrer, the Democratic party nominee, has been wishy-washy on the issue, both praising the project and raising questions about [who will be displaced by it](#) .

The importance of job creation will continue to be a pivotal issue in deciding the political futures of large scale commercial development in New York, but this knife can cut both ways: Wal Mart [was successfully thwarted](#) from gaining a foothold in New York, because it is perceived as an exploitative employer and poor corporate citizen.

Immigrant Small Business Development (Or "I am yearning to breathe free, not to be a terrorist")

The obstacles facing small business entrepreneurs in New York City are legion. Seen as representing the bottom of the economic food chain, immigrant entrepreneurs fight for respect

by {ga=mwinstongriffith}

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wherever they set up shop. Most have limited access to conventional forms of working capital and many possess little or no formal business training that will help them grow and make a bigger contribution to the city's economy.

Some areas, like the ethnically kaleidoscopic streets of Northwest Queens, have been reborn over the last few years, spurred on by the business activity of new arrivals. One would think that in a city where immigrant levels are at historically high levels -almost 3 million New Yorkers were born in a foreign county - the needs and contributions of immigrant small business people would be more fully appreciated. In fact, the term micro-entrepreneur has become popular over the last fifteen years largely as a way to categorize a culture of subsistence-level commercial activity honed in the developing world. Some research estimates that micro-entrepreneurs now make up 35 percent of the employment force in Brooklyn, Bronx and Queens.

The reality is politicians and policy makers, who rarely pay attention to constituencies they perceive as largely unorganized non-voters, are only now beginning to wake up to the importance of immigrant entrepreneurs. One possible indication that policy advocates are taking immigrant business development more seriously is the fact that the Center for an Urban Future is releasing [a report on immigrant entrepreneurs](#) and how the city can support them.

Perhaps in another sign of things to come, organizations like the East Harlem's [Esperanza del Barrio](#), Bushwick's [Latin American Workers Project](#) and [Urban Justice Center's Street Vendor Project](#), have been putting pressure on the administration to improve conditions for street vendors in the city, including better treatment by the police, more public space to accommodate vending and an increase in the number of vending licenses the city provides.

The Bloomberg Administration asserts that it has reorganized the [Department of Small Business Services](#) to focus more on micro-entrepreneurs and has opened up [Business Solution Centers](#) in all boroughs to provide technical assistance to entrepreneurs. But beyond this gesture, immigrant constituencies and interest groups are sure to demand more from city officials. For instance there are efforts to gain support for immigrant entrepreneurs through measures as varied as public capitalization of loan funds, to the rezoning of areas to accommodate and incubate small businesses. Some of this advocacy goes beyond small business development

Campaign 2005: Real Estate Boom; Corporate Developments; Immigrant Entrepreneurs.

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issues and challenges the formal and informal status of immigrants in the city: Esperanza del Barrio is leading an immigrant rights campaign to allow undocumented entrepreneurs more freedom to pursue work opportunities.

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