

Waterfront Housing For Everyone

by David Yassky

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In my district in Brooklyn, there are acres of manufacturing land on the Greenpoint-Williamsburg waterfront slated for residential rezoning. Development of this land is expected to yield up to 10,000 houses and apartments in the next few years and dramatically alter the community. While new apartments are desperately needed in the area and the city as a whole, there is also a great need for affordable housing in this lower-income neighborhood.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg has announced an ambitious new housing plan, but because of the state and city budget woes — and federal government indifference — housing subsidies have been greatly reduced. To create enough affordable apartments in places like Greenpoint-Williamsburg, we must find new and innovative policy tools.

One possible solution is to link affordability to the zoning regulations by allowing developers to build slightly bigger if they dedicate some of their profit for the creation of affordable housing. In certain dense areas of Manhattan, a similar special zoning category already exists called, "inclusionary zoning." Developers who build residential apartments in these districts can build a little higher if they include a sizable percentage of the apartments for low-income households. The program has spurred the development of hundreds of low-income homes in the densest areas of Manhattan, but it has not yet been developed for use in less dense districts in the other four boroughs.

Some have argued that the program is not viable outside of Manhattan. However, I believe a modified version of the program could work on rezoned land — particularly those on the city's attractive and highly developable waterfront. Land zoned for residential development is significantly more valuable than land zoned for manufacturing use, and so landowners on the Brooklyn waterfront will benefit financially with these changes. I believe that asking these developers to contribute some money to low-income housing is reasonable.

Some of the manufacturing land in Greenpoint-Williamsburg has already been developed for housing, though the property has not been rezoned. Developers of this land obtained a "use variance," the rights to build housing where they normally could not, by proving that they couldn't make money if they complied with existing zoning regulations. 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

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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 the Brooklyn waterfront.

New York City Councilmember David Yassky represents [district 33](#) in Brooklyn.

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