by Melissa Checker
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STATEN ISLAND — Exactly nine days after Superstorm Sandy devastated Staten Island, leaving 19 dead and hundreds without homes, about 150 Islanders made their way to the Snug Harbor Cultural Center to attend a meeting sponsored by the New York City Economic Development Corporation.

The topic for the evening was not the EDC's disaster recovery programs, bolstering the coastline to prevent future storm surges or potential dangers from the dozens of contaminated sites that line the North Shore and that were flooded during the storm.

Rather, the meeting that night centered on a new plan to build the world's largest Ferris wheel on the St. George waterfront. Known as the New York Wheel, the ride will sit between the ferry terminal and the baseball stadium — in both areas that could flood during 100 and 500-year storms. Approximately, 1.5 miles north, Superstorm Sandy's fierce waves washed a 712-ton oil tanker ashore.

The wheel is set to rise 84 feet higher than the Singapore Flyer, currently the title-holder for world's largest Ferris wheel and will be accompanied by a 340,000-square-foot designer outlet

retail complex and a 130,000-square-foot hotel.

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced the mega-project this September, saying it will bring much-needed economic development to the struggling North Shore of the island, which in 2010 had poverty rates 58 percent and unemployment rates 13 percent higher than in the rest of Staten Island.

Although a handful of residents, small business owners and union members at the Nov. 13 meeting on the development welcomed its promises of jobs and investment, more commonly, residents' two-minute testimonies included adjectives like "insulting," "outrageous" and "insensitive."

"Part of our island was just devastated in the floodplains. And this is actually going to be built in the floodplain," said local resident Stephanie Woodard. She called the structures "enormous, vulnerable."

Officials with the company that will raise the New York Wheel assured meeting-goers that the structure would be designed to withstand 300-mile per hour winds and surges from storms as super-sized as those created by Sandy.

The rest of the complex, meanwhile, will be built to at least silver LEED certification and could actually help prevent damage from such storms, according to the company's website . Furthermore, the buildings will "include almost five acres of green roof" and a water capture system to absorb rainwater and release it on a controlled basis into the harbor, according to the site. "It is safe to say that our project significantly protects what is now an exposed and relatively old retaining wall at Richmond Terrace."

However, Nancy Rooney, a nurse who attended the Nov. 13 meeting commented, "I think the timing is poor and we need to reconsider our priorities on this Island."

City Councilwoman Debi Rose, who said she "generally supports" the project, prefaced the meeting by stating that it "should have been postponed" in light of the fact that "Staten Island

was ground zero for Hurricane Sandy."

If the juxtaposition of the two events seems contradictory, closer observation of various land use plans and projects reveals that the New York Wheel tops a long line of seemingly contradictory development initiatives on the North Shore.

This 5-mile stretch of waterfront currently houses approximately 21 sites that are contaminated by previous or existing industrial development. All of them sit less than 70 feet from homes and along the shores of the Kill Van Kull, a tidal straight that is also part of the Diamond Alkali Superfund Site, the most costly cleanup ever undertaken by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency .

Long before Sandy hit, local activists were practically begging city officials, through emails, testimonies and public meetings, to better consider the effects of rising sea levels and climate change on the area. Beryl Thurman, president of the North Shore Waterfront Conservancy of Staten Island, has raised concerns about the city's inattention to climate change, sea level rise and storm surges so often that some colleagues refer to her as "Chicken Little."

Now that Chicken Little's sky has actually fallen, will the Bloomberg administration proceed with the proliferation of development projects set to punctuate its end? Or will Sandy signal the start of a more systematized and careful approach to development that takes seriously toxic legacies on the North Shore and the effects of climate change? Events on the North Shore over the past two weeks indicate that Sandy's alarm bells are growing faint indeed.

Mixed Use and Then Someâ€¦

The North Shore has always been a "mixed use" neighborhood. During the industrial revolution, Staten Island's waterways became integral to the city's growing economy, and industries multiplied along the North Shore, which was already the borough's most populous area. Although 1961 zoning laws required that new residences be protected from certain kinds of industries, the city did not require that existing industries build buffers between their operations and homes.

Today, thanks to its industrial past and present, the North Shore hosts three federal Superfund sites, 15 state Superfund sites, an over-capacity sewer treatment plant, an industrial salt plant

and other chemical-using businesses like a furniture reupholstering company, home heating oil company and auto body shops. The North Shore is also home to one of the East Coast's busiest ports, and hundreds of ships and diesel trucks visit the neighborhood daily.

In the wake of Sandy, local activists are calling for the city, state and federal government to answer their questions about whether — and to what degree — those contaminants were distributed by flood waters.
In an email to city officials, Victoria Gillen, president of Elm Park Civic Association and the North Shore Community Coalition for Environmental Justice, wrote, "The bigger question is WILL THERE BE TESTING? People often live right next to these operations ... Can we get some GENUINE responses regarding our toxic sites on Staten Island? â€¦ Were we and our families and businesses, exposed to toxins?"

One of Gillen's major concerns is a former linseed oil manufacturing plant owned by Archer Daniels Midland, or ADM. From 1939 to 1942, ADM agreed to use a portion of their property on Staten Island to store 1,200 tons of high-grade uranium ore en route from the Belgian Congo to be used in building the atomic bomb. However, at some point (either during initial delivery or eventual shipment), uranium spilled on the waterfront property, leaving levels of radium and uranium contamination nearly 10 times higher than allowable standards in some places.

Seventy years later, in 2010, the EPA announced that the US Army Corps of Engineers would assess and clean the site, now referred to as the "Richmond Terrace Radiological Site." Currently remediation is set to begin in 2014.

Last month, Sandy's waters inundated site, according to neighboring residents. In a post-Sandy statement, the EPA states that it does not "believe that any [of its short-term removal or long-term remedial] sites were impacted in ways that would pose a threat to nearby communities." But some Staten Islanders remain highly concerned that future storms could unsettle and distribute radioactive contaminants from the site.

Local residents are now calling for the city to halt the development of approximately 89 two-family homes across the street from the radiological site. The houses will be in an "A" zone, subject to a 100-year flood. Not only are residents worried that chemicals about the flooding, they say they are also concerned that the site may be located on a former wetland.

At a Staten Island Community Board 1 Local Area Committee meeting last Tuesday, November 21st, Dan Walsh of the Office of Environmental Remediation maintained that the site is not in a known wetland. The site is likely to undergo additional environmental review, however, considering that it is in a flood area close to known environmental hazards.

Seven blocks west, a second property faces similar controversies — a self-storage facility where high levels of chemical compounds were recently found in vapor samples. The owners of the site have enrolled the facility in the New York City Brownfield Cleanup Program. Partial remediation to mitigate is set to begin next year. But, local activists claim that it, too, is located in a historic wetland and is likely to flood often.

For Thurman, plans to partially remediate chemicals at the site are inadequate because they do not address enough of its contaminants and do not “deal with the possibilities of sea level rising, storm surges and flooding conditions.”

During Sandy, all of the units on the first floor of the storage facility flooded, and customers suffered significant losses.

Joelle Morrison of Stapleton and her husband were storing belongings at the facility temporarily as they prepared to move into a new house. “About 20 percent [of our belongings] are left,” she said. “And it all has to be cleanedâ€¦ It smells terrible. There were sewage plants nearby and God knows what else.”

Even further west, the EDC is partnering with the New York Container terminal to expand the site to include a 50-foot-deep container ship berth. That berth site, which includes two city-owned parcels, extends into approximately 16.38 acres of tidal wetlands that will require filling or dredging
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The expansion coincides with the raising of the Bayonne Bridge to accommodate so-called “post-panamax ships,” or massive supertankers that will soon be coming through the Panama Canal. Meanwhile, recent studies find that regularly sized container ships can emit almost the same amount of cancer and asthma-causing material chemicals as up to 50 million cars.

The EDC is currently preparing an environmental impact statement that it says will address the project's impact on existing wetlands and other environmental implications, including air pollution from mobile sources such as cargo ships.

Sustainability Schizophrenia

Certainly, in dense urban spaces, especially industrial areas, competition between environmental, economic and other priorities is always fierce.

In a planning document entitled "The North Shore 2030," the EDC outlines an ambitions set of goals for the 5-mile stretch of land: "Create and retain jobs in the active maritime industry; protect environmentally sensitive areas; enhance historic residential and commercial neighborhoods; provide greater public access to current and future recreational areas."

The plan also notes that the area needs infrastructure improvements, including better stormwater drainage, sanitary sewers and traffic/road conditions.

Since the publication of the plan a year ago, industrial priorities emerge as clearly winning the race to the top of the EDC's agenda. In particular, development practices support local activists' claims that the current administration is paying insufficient attention to dangers from both climate change and environmental contaminants.

This past summer, the EDC announced its intent to designate portions of the North Shore as a new "Industrial Business Zone" or area "of land already used by the industrial sector that will be preserved for industrial purposes (as opposed to commercial and residential development)." Companies within these IBZs, or companies that relocate to them, are eligible for tax credits, enhanced sanitation services and employee training programs
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North Shore residents, however, were incensed to hear that their neighborhood might host more industries. "Bottom line: the areas with people of color, people without tremendous economic resources, are paying the price for Bloomberg's projects — while our taxes support these changes, we do not share in the benefits, and find ourselves, here on Staten Island, once again

a dumping ground for the city's unwanted garbage," wrote Gillen in a response to an editorial in Architect's Newspaper .

Also this summer, the Department of City Planning launched a new partnership with the Northfield Local Development Corporation on a state-funded "Brownfield Opportunity Area," or BOA, grant to create a strategic plan for part of that same area. The BOA website states that project goals include "supporting new retail services and jobs, strengthening the working waterfront and providing needed amenities including open space and waterfront access." Importantly, the BOA is intended to "restore environmental quality to areas affected by industrial contaminants."

But the areas designated for the BOA and the IBZ overlap. Thus, redevelopment stemming from the BOA will also have to comply with the IBZ, meaning redevelopment will have to prioritize industrial properties. The degree to which those types of properties will achieve the goal of restoring "environmental quality" to the area remains questionable.

As Thurman said, "We also don't want more industrial/manufacturing, which is going to poison us with contaminants and pollutants while being condoned by our officials â€¦ as something that is being done for the greater good."

In other IBZs, the EDC has emphasized the need for bringing in industries that promote "environmentally friendly and efficient practices." However, the EDC has provided no further details about whether it will seek such businesses on the North Shore, or what they would look like.

Taken together, the various plans and projects — the IBZ, the Container Terminal, the New York Wheel, the residential developments — promise to deliver more of what the North Shore already has.
Before development brings more business, more residents, more shoppers and more workers to the North Shore, residents want to know whether the city can first make the waterfront safer and more stable for those living and working there now.

"We need to bolster whatever efforts that are being made to prevent climate change issues from further damaging the shore line leading back to the residential communities," Thurman said.

“Nothing should be going on that waterfront unless they have a workable solution to combat climate change. Clearly we can do better than what we are doing, which amounts to continually shooting ourselves in the foot with poor choices.”

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Images of New York Wheel, Staten Island development courtesy of the mayor's office and the New York City Economic Development Corporation.