

Change and Conflict on the Brooklyn Waterfront

by Peter B. Fleischer

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Change is coming along the heavily industrialized East River shores of Greenpoint and Williamsburg in Brooklyn.

Brooklyn streets with lovely names like Metropolitan and Grand once linked Manhattan's teeming Lower East Side to the city's largest borough via ferries. They retain magnificent skyline views, as do the unused piers and wharves off of Huron, India and Java Streets, that via freighter linked these neighborhoods to markets and goods worldwide. These once busy waterfronts now house the Newtown Creek wastewater treatment plant, the hulking remains of abandoned industrial structures, dilapidated piers.

Today, a thriving club and residential scene has emerged on Bedford Avenue, one stop from Manhattan by the "L" Train and a short walk from the river. Waterfront that was once the exclusive preserve of power plants, oil storage facilities, lumber yards, ferry slips and working piers, is being transformed into parkland, housing and a focus for a community returning to its maritime roots. The existence of large, underutilized, relatively inexpensive, waterfront parcels, easy access to Manhattan and superb views of the Manhattan skyline fuel the transformation.

Change comes to these neighborhoods, much as it comes throughout the city, in fits and starts. In recent years, residents have opposed municipal uses such as solid waste transfer stations and power plants. Today, the locals are advocating for public access to both the East River waterfront and the banks of polluted and much-maligned Newtown Creek while continuing to oppose power plants.

Conflict has come to this corner of Brooklyn as large empty spaces have been discovered by groups as diverse as power plant proponents, waterfront recreationists, housing developers and open space advocates. The neighborhood's lack of open space and waterfront access combined with a long history of having noxious municipal uses sited in the community makes today's clash interesting even by New York City standards. A City Planning Commission zoning review, that promises to be contentious, is under way.

In Williamsburg, NAG, a community organization originally founded to fight waste transfer stations, has called for improved public waterfront access, open space and mixed-use development. In Greenpoint, 41 local, civic and non-profit community groups joined to form the Greenpoint Waterfront Association for Parks and Planning, GWAPP, an umbrella advocacy

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group. Again, the association's original focus was opposition to power plants. Both organizations now focus on the challenge posed by development --residential, commercial and industrial.

Joe Vance, co-chair of the Greenpoint association, described his role as one of the many watch dogs for the community. He hopes to "shepherd the neighborhood through the rezoning, open space and development processes" now unfolding.

At Brooklyn Borough Hall on June 13th, Governor Pataki announced grants to study and plan for public access to these Brooklyn waterfronts and for joint city and state development of open space at the WNYC transmitter site by the Greenpoint piers. These grants follow the recent \$9.3 million purchase of more than six acres at Kent Avenue between North 7th and North 9th Streets for New York University sports fields, a waterfront esplanade and community open space.

Private sector forces are in the mix too. Two proposed waterfront developments in Greenpoint, comprising 38 acres, would, in Joe Vance's estimate add 15,000 new residents to a community of perhaps 75,000 people, dramatically inundating the ara.

And then, there is the power plant. To help meet the city's estimated future electricity demand, the TransGas Energy (TGE) System has proposed a 1,100-megawatt facility for the Bushwick Creek Inlet at the border of Williamsburg and Greenpoint. The energy company favors the site because of its proximity to electric transmission lines, oil pipelines, Con Ed steam and the river. The neighborhood groups have banded together to oppose the project. According to Vance, "this is the first power plant of this size proposed for a waterfront site without a power plant."

TGE is expected to submit its application late this summer.



Peter B. Fleischer, currently writing a book on the New York City waterfront, was formerly a transportation and environment policy advisor to New York City Mayors David Dinkins and Rudy Giuliani.