

Governors Island And The United Nations

by Peter B. Fleischer

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To look at Governors Island, one would think that it was untouched by September 11th. But a proposal for the island, sponsored by the Regional Plan Association, has languished, in part because of the uncertainty in and around lower Manhattan. The private investment needed may falter now. The mayor and governor have not significantly advanced the plan, a mixed-use development concept for the island, despite their well-publicized agreement of twenty months ago.

There will almost certainly never again be available, another waterfront parcel as large, perfectly situated and symbolic of the city's history.

So what should happen?

Governor's Island should be designated the new home of the United Nations. A new UN campus, replacing its cramped seventeen-acre facility, would be a powerful reaffirmation of the world body's increasing importance. Such a move would also be an affirmation of New York City as a global city and a centuries old refuge for huddled masses.

On thirty acres of Governors Island, the UN could have both the modern facilities it needs and the security it clearly requires. Through dues paid by all the world's nations, the UN could afford to maintain the island's historic structures as ambassadors' residences, conference space or offices. The bulk of the 175 acre island - including its historic forts and waterfront esplanade - could become an International Peace Park, paid for and maintained by the world, open to all, but used most heavily by the host population, the people of New York and New Jersey.

The Regional Plan Association's plan for recreational, educational and cultural facilities could guide the non-UN, development. Space on the island for hotels and conference venues would remain, possibly at scaled-down levels, but private capital would not need to be the trigger.

The United Nations could sponsor ferry service from New Jersey, nearby Red Hook in Brooklyn as well as the Battery, providing easy and free access for park users, tourists and others. In fact, Governors Island is uniquely situated to become a harbor ferry crossroads linking points in all corners of the harbor. Existing East River ferry landings could facilitate the commute of UN

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personnel and dignitaries from Manhattan's East Side where many consulates are located and where many officials live. The East Side would benefit from the loss of traffic.

Benefits would accrue all around. The city and state would not need to buy the island to gain open space that many New Yorkers believe is theirs anyway. The valuable land at the present UN site would return to city tax roles. As a development site or a corporate headquarters, the present UN complex would have extraordinary market value to many parties. Jobs created there would yield city and state income tax. New York City would benefit from a mini-construction boom.

Could it happen?

Before September 11th, probably not. Afterwards, polls show that New York City's "favorable" rating reached 93 percent. Five years ago, it was 42 percent. Vice President Cheney recently declared that "America Loves New York". The President vowed to assist. Governor Pataki's \$54 billion request to Washington is in trouble, perhaps owing to its size, perhaps because it has been perceived as a call for a blank check. Still, the New York area needs extensive disaster relief.

This proposal, admittedly addressing only part of the region's needs, asks for support in a symbolic and very practical way. It calls on the governor and the mayor to jointly and immediately make a 911 call to the president asking him to ask the United Nations to build a new home on Governors Island amidst an International Peace Park that is accessible and open to all. Congress and the federal government would be asked to transfer Governors Island to the world body.

Governors Island has a three hundred-year history as a military base. Its forts, docks and barracks, unused for years, should be designated, even in war, for peaceful purposes as a symbol that New York City, the innocent victim of international terror, can become the place where the world unites to dramatically and clearly turn swords into ploughshares.



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.