

Waterfront Rezoning And Its Shortcomings

by {ga=ccraft}

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Some New Yorkers look at what is happening on the waterfront in Manhattan, with its ring of continuous public parkland, and think with glee: Some day the rest of New York will have this too.

But it is only in Manhattan that the public owns most of the shoreline, thanks to the claims of ownership by the early Dutch and English governments. Outside Manhattan, there is significantly less publicly owned waterfront land. As a result, absent the ability to attract \$10 million or so to acquire a site for public use, each community must rely on the city's waterfront zoning rules to ensure that private waterfront development includes public access.

Waterfront zoning can be a powerful tool. It controls the placement of buildings on waterfront sites and requires public space along the water's edge and visual access to the water. But, despite the supposed force of law that zoning carries, there is little available for the city to enforce the rules once the buildings are built and occupied. There are many worst-case scenarios of public waterfront on private property - the poor maintenance along the Shore Parkway and virtually every pier in the City; the lack of security on every bridge walkway and beneath every elevated; and the locked gates at Shore Towers in Astoria and Waterside Plaza in Manhattan. On the waterfront, the economic instinct of the owner is to cater to the paying clientele, not the folks jogging past in knee high socks and tank tops. What good is foot traffic if they can't afford to buy anything?

Thus the enormous reaches of green space at the blue water's edge may remain out of reach.

This may be what happens at Greenpoint and Williamsburg. Much has been written about the rezoning of much of Greenpoint and Williamsburg, primarily along the waterfront. (See, for example, Tom Angotti's [articles](#) in Gotham Gazette's land use topic page). To me, it represents everything that's right, and everything that's wrong, with land use planning for waterfronts in New York City.

It is right because the city is looking ahead to make better use of the waterfront, our most underutilized asset. It intends to commit \$100 million upfront to the plan for the Greenpoint and Williamsburg waterfront, and hopes to create 2,500 affordable apartments.

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But it's also wrong, for several reasons.

It ignores the history of the neighborhood as a manufacturing center, once home to a famous shipbuilding industry; the USS Monitor was built near Bushwick Inlet during the Civil War. A massive rope factory built around the same time on Newtown Creek is now the Greenpoint Manufacturing and Design Center, a world-renowned incubator for small woodworking and related crafts. The plans should do more to ensure that "Made in Brooklyn" is recognized around the world.

The rezoning plan for Greenpoint and Williamsburg neglects the potential uses of the water itself, doing little to encourage potential uses such as marinas and boat launches. While there is now greater access of water taxi-style ferry service, the rezoning plan does not recommend where those water taxi stops happen, or where connecting bus service might be made. For a waterfront land use plan, the transportation component seems largely unaddressed.

In a city where even enormous projects get reduced to a single angle - the West Side Stadium gets the press, the 59-block rezoning area around it gets ignored - the debate in Greenpoint and Williamsburg has focused almost exclusively on the affordable housing. Yet this may never come even close to being realized. "The incentives for developers to include affordable housing units may be so negligible to their bottom line," Councilmember David Yassky pointed out recently, that Bloomberg's expectation for 25 percent of the new housing to be affordable may be extremely optimistic.

Meanwhile, little has been made of the failure of this plan to ensure some public entity will address the maintenance needs and operating potential of this public space in the future. But to me, this is very telling. It means the plan is really designed for the real estate developers of the present moment, not for the future generations of community dwellers.

What most New Yorkers don't know is that when the city created sweeping waterfront zoning rules in 1993, most waterfront areas in residential neighborhoods were placed in low density zoning categories that will never have public access. Looking ahead, the huge expectations on the private sector to provide and maintain public amenities at the water's edge, will go just as unrealized as the affordable housing. Without a dedicated entity to oversee development, operating and maintenance, to ensure the waterfront gets rebuilt and remains public, this plan will fail to make sure that the waterfront belongs to the people, not simply those who can afford to live along its banks.

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