

Contact: Jeremy Soffin, 212/253-2727, ext. 303, or 917/860-9076



RPA Supports Atlantic Yards' Arena Block, Wants Changes in Second Phase of Development

*Planning Group Supports Large Scale Development on Atlantic Transit Hub,
Fears Public Spaces, Final Design Won't Live Up to Expectations*

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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BROOKLYN – On the eve of Wednesday’s public hearing, Regional Plan Association (RPA) today released its position on the Atlantic Yards development proposed by Forest City Ratner Companies. The statement expressed the organization’s support for the signature arena block but called for changes to the eastern portion of the site plan to make the open space unambiguously public and ensure design excellence over the full build-out. The statement also warned that the City and State must make additional traffic and transit improvements to support this and other major developments in downtown Brooklyn.

“One of the core principles of regional planning is that large scale development belongs near transit hubs like Atlantic Terminal,” said Robert D. Yaro, President of RPA. “In this case, it is also critical that the impacts on thriving Brooklyn neighborhoods in the project’s vicinity are limited and that public benefits are maximized. The arena and the four signature Frank Gehry buildings that will surround it will become iconic images representing the borough and will bring tremendous benefits to the area. The public spaces and world-class design promised in the second phase, however, are unlikely to develop as planned and cannot be supported in their current state. We believe, however, that these flaws can be fixed within the parameters of the current planning process.”

In addition to supporting construction of the arena block, RPA made a series of recommendations, including a revised site plan and oversight for the eastern blocks; necessary public actions to support Brooklyn’s growth; and additional actions to be taken by the developer to mitigate the impact of arena events.

Changes East of Sixth Avenue

According to RPA, the eastern portion of the project is an appropriate location for dense residential development and the open space that is so critical to the success of the venture. Unfortunately, while this part of the plan features the bulk of the development, it is also the riskiest part of the project from both the public and private perspective. The current site plan calls for an experimental series of Frank Gehry-designed residential buildings connected by a non-traditional Laurie Olin-designed network of open spaces. Two outstanding designers have struggled to find an accommodation between the highly figurative massing of the buildings and the need to create an easily comprehended and rational network of public open spaces. In spite of the quality of the design, this tension results in two significant risks – that its open space plan will not successfully attract residents from outside of the project buildings themselves, and that the entire plan will not be built as designed.

To overcome these risks RPA proposed three major changes that could be implemented without delaying the project:

- 1) The open space plan should be altered to make it both unambiguously public and compatible with the variety of building footprints allowed in the General Project Plan.
- 2) The open space should be mapped as City park land and maintained either by the Parks Department or an independent non-profit with representative public and community participation in its Board of Directors through funding from the developer.
- 3) A design review process similar to Battery Park City should be established to ensure design excellence during build-out. This process will help guarantee that the finished product will meet a high standard, even as the market and the architects change.

“The open space is one of the project’s key benefits for the local community, so it’s critical that the parks truly feel accessible and open to the public,” Yaro said. “A re-working of the site plan and design guidelines will also provide the developer with the flexibility that he needs to adapt to changes in the market and in the architects chosen to design the buildings. The final project is not going to look exactly like the models, and it’s time to acknowledge that and plan accordingly to ensure the public gets the standard of design it was promised.”

Necessary Public Actions

RPA also warned that without sufficient investments from the public sector, the accumulated development in downtown Brooklyn will lead to unbearable congestion. RPA called on the City to meet its responsibilities in advancing the highway improvements assumed in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement, and the City and MTA to devise and implement a long-term comprehensive transportation plan. That plan should include:

- Congestion pricing: The traffic that currently chokes Flatbush, Atlantic and so many of the streets running through downtown Brooklyn and the project area is not new and will only get worse. Rather than putting a halt to all development,

proactive steps must be taken to limit the congestion and allow growth. Much of the traffic that ties up this part of Brooklyn for much of the day is generated by cars and trucks going to and from the free bridges over the East River. Over the long-term, the most effective way to reduce this congestion will be to implement a congestion charge for entering the Manhattan CBD from all directions that provides incentives for traveling in non-peak times and taking transit. This may not be a solution for this year, but if it is not in place by the time the bulk of this or any other development comes on line, the area's congestion may become untenable.

- Improved transit capacity and access: While Atlantic Terminal is Brooklyn's leading transit hub, arena patrons and additional workers and residents, both from the project and Brooklyn's continued development, will put a strain on its many subway lines and crowd its platforms. To maintain the current level of service and safety, the MTA must
 - complete a more comprehensive study of how it can achieve a comfortable level of service on all lines passing through downtown Brooklyn;
 - accelerate its study of bus rapid transit in Brooklyn, especially along Flatbush Avenue;
 - consider how the Atlantic Branch of the Long Island Rail Road can be made a more effective system for delivering large numbers of riders from the eastern and southern portions of Brooklyn, and from Queens and Long Island;
 - and examine each of the proposed subway transfer points in Brooklyn to determine their cost-effectiveness and network benefits.

"Developers should not be punished for the public sector's failure to provide the necessary infrastructure improvements," Yaro said. "Instead, the City and State should be held accountable for ensuring that sufficient infrastructure is in place to accommodate growth with limited impact on the quality of life of existing residents and neighborhoods. We hope that the City's upcoming Strategic Plan will be a big step in the right direction."

Mitigation of Arena Impact

While the statement supported construction of the arena, RPA called for additional steps to minimize traffic and ensure that the arena functions safely and effectively. While many of the proposed mitigation measures should be effective, others need to be fully evaluated or improved. Specifically, the Draft Environmental Impact Statement does not convincingly address the following problems, and RPA called on Forest City Ratner to show more conclusively how the proposed mitigation measures address these issues:

- Demonstrate that the surges of crowds before and after arena events will not create hazardous conditions on subway platforms, stairways and escalators. If conditions are inadequate, then access/egress to subway stations should be redesigned in coordination with the MTA.

- Demonstrate that the parking system, particularly the stacked parking garages and pre-assignment of reserved parking at remote locations, will be effective. Details are lacking, and it is not clear that patrons will use stacked or remote parking.
- Demonstrate that shuttle vehicles to remote parking will be attractive to users. These vehicles will be subject to the same traffic congestion as other cars. For this and the previous issue, what are the contingencies if they fail to work as planned?
- The width of sidewalks in the immediate vicinity of the arena should be tested for adequate pedestrian level of service and, if found wanting, added setbacks and less vehicle space should be considered.

Regional Plan Association (RPA) is an independent regional planning organization that improves the quality of life and the economic competitiveness of the 31-county New York-New Jersey-Connecticut region through research, planning, and advocacy. Since 1922, RPA has been shaping transportation systems, protecting open spaces, and promoting better community design for the region's continued growth. We anticipate the challenges the region will face in the years to come, and we mobilize the region's civic, business, and government sectors to take action. For more information about Regional Plan Association, please visit our website, www.rpa.org.

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