

**Regional Plan Association Testimony
Delivered by Christopher Jones, Vice President for Research
City Council Hearing on Atlantic Yards Development
May 26, 2005**

My name is Christopher Jones, and I am the Vice President for Research at Regional Plan Association, a not-for-profit planning and advocacy organization that has served the New York region since the 1920s. Thank you for this opportunity to share RPA's insights on the impacts of the proposed development over the MTA's Atlantic Yards in Brooklyn.

RPA has long been an advocate of enhancing Downtown Brooklyn's status as New York City's third central business district. In concept, the proposal by Forest City Ratner is consistent with this goal. However, there are several specific questions and concerns that need to be addressed before the project moves forward.

Clearly, the project would bring several important benefits, both to Brooklyn and the New York region. From a regional perspective, it is important to encourage new office and residential growth in the urban core, where it can be supported by public transit and make jobs and services accessible to those who need them most. By creating dense, mixed use development around one of the busiest transit hubs in the region, the project would make good use of the development potential near Atlantic Terminal and strengthen Downtown Brooklyn as a central business district. The proposed sports arena may also make sense in this location. While we strongly oppose the proposed Jets Stadium in Manhattan, the smaller, more active basketball arena functions very differently and is more compatible with urban business, residential and cultural activities. The recently announced community benefit agreement to reserve 50% of the residential units for affordable housing is also a major selling point for the project.

Our concerns center on the process for approving the plan and several unanswered questions about the public costs and impacts. Unfortunately, we don't know if this is the best project that can be achieved because no alternatives were sought or evaluated prior to city state endorsement of the project. Let me begin with the implications for the MTA.

Much like the Hudson Yards on Manhattan's Far West Side, the Atlantic Yards are an extremely valuable MTA asset. Given the fiscal crises crippling the MTA's operating and capital budgets, it is vital that the agency get the most out of each of these assets. We are heartened that there will be a bidding process for the site, but as on the West Side the process is being tacked onto a deal that has been in the works for two years and provides several inherent advantages to a single developer, including promises of subsidies and zoning overrides that no other bidder will have. To level the playing field as much as

possible and encourage other proposals, the MTA should extend the bidding period and the city and state should indicate a willingness to provide the necessary zoning for whatever proposal yields fair market value for the MTA and the greatest public benefits for the city and the surrounding community.

The project's financing also follows a poor policy precedent set on the Far West Side: public subsidies for professional sports facilities. Sports facilities are generally not great job generators nor do they produce net fiscal gains for the city. While the arena is likely to be compatible with the area, it does not appear to generate an economic return or other benefits that would justify public subsidies.

As for the proposal itself, there are several areas that require more information and evaluation. In particular, the public has not been adequately informed about the potential traffic and transit impacts of an additional 4,500 housing units, 2 million square feet of office space and a basketball arena. In an area where traffic is already bad, both the Atlantic Yards project and the City's Downtown Brooklyn plan will significantly add to congestion. In addition to understanding the full extent of these impacts, Downtown Brooklyn is need of a comprehensive transportation plan that both increases transit capacity and manages road congestion. At a minimum, the Environmental Impact Statement for the project needs to fully address the traffic and transit implications, and funds should be identified to adequately mitigate these impacts before construction proceeds.

RPA has additional concerns about the urban design of the proposed development. Specifically, both the arena and the eastern portion of the residential development create new "superblocks" that close existing streets and impede pedestrian and auto movement through the area. Further, while the open spaces created by these superblocks are technically public, they appear to be designed more for residents of the new buildings than the surrounding neighborhood. We are pleased, though, that esteemed architect Frank Gehry and landscape architect Laurie Olin will be contributing to the project's design and hope that these major issues can be resolved if the project is selected.

We look forward to working with the Council and others to ensure that these issues are addressed in the coming weeks and months. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

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