

MIDTOWN WEST: MANHATTAN'S LAST GREAT DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITY

The Far West Side of Midtown Manhattan, a roughly 50 block neighborhood dominated by warehouses, the Lincoln Tunnel, Long Island Rail Road yards and the Jacob Javits Center, is the last great development opportunity on the Island. As the rest of Manhattan is built out in commercial or residential development, it has become the focus of a number of proposals for new commercial and sports-related projects, as well as an expansion of the Javits Convention Center. Unfortunately, these proposals have been made largely in a vacuum, without benefit of a master plan that considers transportation, utilities and other infrastructure needs, and without the proper balance of commercial, residential and open space. This panel will discuss these issues and the prospects for a process that will lead to a plan with broad-based stakeholder support.

THE PROPOSALS

A Stadium for the Olympics or the Jets and an Expanded Convention Center

The Long Island Rail Road Yards have been suggested as a potential site for a new retractable roof sports stadium that could potentially host the Olympics and the Jets National Football League franchise. The Olympics proposal would also include an adjacent indoor arena to replace Madison Square Garden. A few years ago, the Yards were also suggested as a potential site for a new Yankee Stadium. Proponents for the stadium tout its potential to be a catalyst for commercial development on the Far West Side and its potential to support an expanded Javits Convention Center. In fact, both the Olympics and the Jets' proposals incorporate a doubling of the exhibition space at the Javits Center. The proposal submitted by the New York 2012 Olympics proposal committee also claims that a tax increment financing district can generate the funds needed to support construction of the stadium and the accompanying transportation improvements.

Opponents have argued that the project, which would require constructing a platform over the Long Island Rail Road yards, would be prohibitively expensive (over \$1 billion), and would not yield the economic benefits its proponents claim. They point out that publicly supported stadiums rarely provide decent returns on the public funds invested and that the City has other projects like school construction or the Second Avenue subway, which are higher priorities. They have also expressed concern about the potential traffic impacts of the various development proposals.

An Expanded CBD

The Group of 35, an ad hoc committee of civic, business, and governmental leaders convened by Senator Charles Schumer, has been investigating opportunities to address the shortage of commercial space and a variety of infrastructure concerns that have limited the expansion of new media and information technology companies in New York City. The Group has investigated opportunities in all five boroughs, and is expected to propose major expansions of the CBD on the far West Side and in Long Island City. Scenarios for a build out of 50 to 100 million square feet of new commercial development are being considered, which would probably translate to between 150 and 300 thousand new jobs. This kind of development would require extensive infrastructure improvements, including new transit, power, telecommunications, gas and water & sewer capacity.

New Residential Development

Another alternative development approach would create an expanded residential neighborhood, with up to 50,000 new housing units. This would address an undeniable need in a city that has a housing shortage that is probably as high as 500,000 units. This scenario would also require extensive infrastructure improvements, though the transportation, power and telecommunications requirements would probably be lower than the needs for a commercial development. A mixed-use development scenario might bring a combination of housing and commercial development.

CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES

Each of these development scenarios would need to address a variety of infrastructure, open space and other amenities. The most obvious is the need to extend the transit network to this neighborhood. The closest subway line currently runs under Eighth Avenue. There is a general consensus that any development scenario, whether it includes office buildings, housing, a new stadium or a combination of the three, will require some form of new transit. The most prominent proposal is for an extension of the #7 subway from Times Square to the proposed stadium site. The MTA is currently beginning an environmental impact study of this proposal, which is likely to cost between \$1-2 billion. If successful, that would take care of access problems from the east, but provide only marginal improvements from the north, south or west.

The Olympic Stadium proposal provides for extensions of the Long Island Rail Road and Metro North to the West Side, but there are concerns about potential conflicts with operations at Penn Station. There have also been proposals to incorporate improved transit service to the West Side with a new commuter rail or rapid transit line across the Hudson River.

There have been several proposals for a new light rail or trolley line running across 42nd Street from the UN to the Javits Center. RPA has proposed a similar light rail line that would run across 42nd Street, down to the Javits Center, then east to Penn Station and Herald Square before heading north along Broadway to Lincoln Center. A trolley line would run on the surface and would be a potential attraction for visitors, but it would provide less than half the capacity of an extended subway line.

It is also clear that quality parkland must be a part of any proposal for commercial or residential development. Even with the Hudson River Park that is currently under construction, Manhattan's West Side will continue to suffer from a severe shortage of open space. Most prospective developers recognize that some portion of the neighborhood will need to be set aside for parkland, if only to make the remaining parcels more attractive. That parkland would ideally relate to the new facilities being constructed on the piers of the Hudson River Park.

Perhaps the most difficult programming element will be ensuring an attractive mix of consumer retail, food and beverage, and cultural establishments. These elements, which must strike a careful balance in a residential area, are essential for developing the kind of vibrant 24-hour communities that most new commercial tenants will demand.

DEVELOPING A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN THAT ADDRESSES ALL OF THESE CONCERNS

The most challenging aspect of these proposed developments is the need to develop consensus among the various stakeholders: existing residents and businesses, housing advocates, commercial developers, football players and Olympic athletes and elected officials on a comprehensive plan that respects the needs of as many interests as possible. Such a consensus can only be achieved if each group feels they have a stake in the plan. Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields has jump started this process with her comprehensive planning study, which has engaged neighborhood, civic, development and housing communities. Some of the questions that will be addressed by the panel are:

- What is the process for developing a master plan that addresses the concerns of all stakeholders?
- How do we balance regional and local concerns?
- To what extent should any development approach be self-financing?
- What is the right mix of commercial, residential and open space development?
- How does the Javits Center and the proposed new stadium fit into this mix?
- What are the infrastructure requirements for these development scenarios?