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The Region Approaches The Far West Side

I'm not much of a philosopher, but I think it was that German guy Hegel who said that history progressed through the clash of opposing viewpoints, and the development of new viewpoints in response to those clashes.

If so, then history advanced at least a yard or two last week at Regional Plan Association's Regional Assembly, entitled "Make No Small Plans". A series of speakers and then smaller panels discussed and argued the proposed development of The Far West Side before an audience of about 600 people at the Waldorf-Astoria hotel. At the end of the day, I would be surprised if even the strongest opponent or supporter did not change his viewpoint at least a smidgen.

As most people know by now, the Bloomberg administration has proposed to develop one of the last underused portions of central Manhattan in grand fashion on the West Side. The proposal includes extending and re-directing the No. 7 subway line, major open space improvements, and most controversially, a football stadium for the New York Jets which is also advertised as an adjunct to the Javits Convention Center. It would all cost a lot of money, but if successful would put a lot of money back, according to its supporters. Was all this a good idea?

Peter Goldmark, the keynote speaker, a director at Environmental Defense, addressed this question from a distant vantage point: What are our priorities as a region and what is the best use of our resources? And given that, how might the Far West Side fit into those priorities and limited resources?

The best use, Goldmark said, was addressing fundamental problems or opportunities that would put the city and region on sounder footing. Before saying what those might be, Goldmark, who recently returned from five years as CEO of the International Herald Tribune in Paris, noted that the city had successfully tackled big challenges before.

One example was the Third Water Tunnel, an unglamorous and expensive project that nevertheless was essential for the long-term health of the city, and began construction in the 1960s (but is still not yet completed). In a dramatic gesture, Goldmark asked for anyone in the elegant ballroom who had anything to do with this project to stand up and be applauded.

Other examples were a series of corrective actions taken in the last generation that fixed or began fixing problems once viewed as intractable. These included restructuring city finances in response to the fiscal crisis of the 1970s; rebuilding the decaying transit system in the 1980s; bringing down crime in the 1990s; and putting the school system under mayoral control since 2000.

So success was possible, Goldmark said. But what should our priorities be now, he asked? Given the threat of terrorism, the environmental situation and the region's continued reliance on essential infrastructure, the region needed to make investments that address these challenges.

The present day analogy to the decision to build another water tunnel might be the ingenuity to create a decentralized power grid that bypasses the error-prone grid that left the city without power for a few days last year, Goldmark said.

"The region that builds a decentralized new power grid will have a huge competitive advantage," Goldmark said. "New York prospers when it is ahead of the game."

With future terrorism strikes an unavoidable possibility, a priority is the capability to have "100 percent inspection" of the thousands of containers that come into port.

And, Goldmark noted the region's mass transit system was once again showing signs of age and deferred maintenance – an unforgivable example of "backsliding" by the region and states from the renewed commitment to the system after the crumbling of the system in the 1970s.

"Should the state and city be financing a football stadium, when they are shortchanging the regional transit system?" Goldmark asked.

Goldmark even questioned whether investing more in Manhattan was the correct approach. "Manhattan is a natural magnet for investment, but the success of the region will depend more on the inner ring" of cities around it, Goldmark asserted.

"Generally, investments that increase redundancy and flexibility should be preferred over those that create choke points" and increase reliance on single industries, Goldmark said, summing up his criteria for using the region's resources.

Goldmark finished by borrowing a line from the famous love song from the movie Casablanca: "The fundamental things apply" – as time goes by.

The sum of Goldmark's remarks were to set, at the beginning of the assembly, a high bar that pro-Far West Side development speakers would have to clear. Following Goldmark was Dan Doctoroff, deputy mayor under Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the man who has stumped and pushed for the project most aggressively.

Doctoroff addressed much of Goldmark's implicit criticism with the argument that the development project would make money. If so, then the revenue could pay for things that Goldmark wanted, like a better transit or school system.

"This does not use public money, it provides public money," Doctoroff said.

The project consisted of six components, Doctoroff said, "all of which are essential." They were extending the No 7 subway line, building the platform over the Westside rail yards, constructing the street network, rezoning the property, expanding the Jacob Javits Convention center, and constructing the football stadium for The Jets.

It was this last component that was the most controversial with the audience, and which the panelists and audience would worry about throughout the rest of the day. Doctoroff insisted the facility was "not a stadium," but rather "the New York Sports and Convention Center." The rectangular space where the Jets would play be a fully functioning part of the convention center when not in use, Doctoroff said. When big men in uniforms weren't blocking tackles, convention goers would stroll from exhibit to exhibit on the huge floor surrounded by 80,000 or so seats. Could a football stadium really double as exhibition space for a convention? It's true the city now lacks the huge floor space that serious convention cities have. But did New York want to become a big convention city? There were a lot of pluses, such as all that hotel and restaurant spending for one, but there were minuses as well. A business district with a stadium and convention center at its core would of a different flavor than one without it, and perhaps be less flexible in the long run than a more mixed office and residential area.

Whatever the practicality of this vision, Doctoroff helped his case for action by beginning his presentation with slides of the Grand Central station area a century ago – the very spot where the audience sat – before and after the wide, smoking rail yards of New York Central had been decked over. One of the biggest public/private projects in history, it converted one of the worst addresses in the city into one of the best. It also, not incidentally, created millions of dollars in real estate value and tax revenue.

The slides made Doctoroff's point that the city most of us knew and loved was built on big, bold plans that were implemented and which worked. What were our century's big bold plans?

Doctoroff and Goldmark were the twin pillars that set the boundary of the debate for the coming day. After the two men came four panelists who landed on various sides of the question or added to it. They were Max Bond, a leading city architect; the Hon. Richard N. Gottfried, the assemblyman who represents the areas in and around the district; Lynne Sagalyn, professor of real-estate development at the University of Pennsylvania and author of Times Square Roulette; and Stephen Ross, CEO of The Related Companies and developer of the new Time-Warner building at Columbus Center.

Gottfried made the case against the city's project and presented an alternative. He presented the Hell's Kitchen Neighborhood Association plan, which decked over the yards, but got rid of the stadium, while still expanding the Javits convention center and developing the area with new offices and residences. His plan also dropped the No. 7 extension, and Gottfried asserted that existing North-South MTA lines could be extended into the area using existing tunnels.

"The stadium is at best dead weight," Gottfried said. He would include more housing on the site.

Bond brought up an idea that has simmered here and there of moving the Port Authority bus terminal to the other side of the Hudson as part of an intermodal terminal, and having people take a train into Manhattan. This would remove buses from the street and probably improve air quality, but would also make many people's journeys two-seat rides rather than one.

Sagalyn, author of the authoritative book on another huge redevelopment project a decade back, Times Square Roulette, reminded the audience that the project set an important precedent of the city essentially selling development rights in exchange for the funding of needed infrastructure. She also applauded the city for having a clear, comprehensible vision for the site, which she said past experience has shown is necessary if the long haul of redevelopment is to be achieved.

But given that, she also said that past experience had shown that flexibility is needed because, usually, "the first plan" is not the final plan. Why not make sure that the zoning change include the possibility of more housing, she said, which, after all, gets roughly the same rent now as office space?

As for the questions about why the cities outside Manhattan should support such Manhattan-centric infrastructure spending, Sagalyn said that they needed to keep in mind that "we live in an interconnected region," and that we forget that at our peril. While Goldmark urged the audience to think about the fundamentals, Sagalyn had a slightly different message: "Think Broadly."

Stephen Ross made Sagalyn's point about Manhattan's importance to the region a bit less diplomatically. Paraphrasing a well-known and often disliked comment about General Motors,

Ross said that "What's good for Manhattan is good for the region."

After the morning session, the conversation continued in more detail and at a finer-grained level. Before lunch, six smaller panels debated the specifics of the Far West Side – transportation, financing, open space and regional implications – and in some cases managed to avoid the topic almost altogether in discussing regional housing issues and the future of suburban centers. Not surprisingly, the proposed stadium managed to come up in almost every one of these discussions. In the later afternoon, a panel led by architecture critic Paul Goldberger would debate the stadium proposal in more detail. Representatives from the Jets and the convention business would argue of the stadium/convention center merits, while urban planners raised possible obstacles and costs. In the end, it seemed the facility's opponents pointed to a series of case studies to show that stadiums are poor public investments and repel development, while the proponents did their best to argue that this facility would be different.

At lunch, Sen. Charles Schumer spoke and continued the theme that Goldmark had started of the region stepping up to the plate with needed development and infrastructure improvement. About every half century, the senator said, the city and region had made a big push that provided the basis for the city's and region's further expansion.

In the 1900s, the city began building the subway system, Schumer said. In the 1950s, the Robert Moses built many of its bridges and tunnels. Now, roughly a half century later, the city is ready for another big push. In Schumer's mind, this would include extending the No. 7, building the 2nd Avenue subway, connecting Long Island Rail Road to Grand Central Terminal, linking Lower Manhattan to Kennedy Airport, and building a cross-harbor freight tunnel. Given the day's focus, Schumer spoke most highly of the No. 7 and compared the Far West Side to Canary Wharf in London, which Schumer said languished until the new Jubilee Line extension was built. Extending the No. 7, Schumer said, would "complete the transit puzzle." (The Senator's puzzle is, appropriately, focused on New York, and omitted the vital new passenger rail tunnel under the Hudson River, for which RPA has proposed a loop configuration in Manhattan).

"What do we spend our money on for the long term health of the city and region?" Schumer asked.

It was more or less the same question asked by Goldmark at day's beginning. In the end the speakers and the audience were left better armed to address not only the Far West Side but the region as a whole, and the always essential question: what kind of region do we want to become, and how do we get there?

--Alex Marshall, Senior Editor, *Spotlight on the Region*

Calendar

Saturday, April 24

New York Division, Electric Railroader's Association, is sponsoring a chartered bus trip to explore the route of New Jersey Transit's new River Line between Trenton and Camden. Call 718-784-3643 for info.

Wednesday, April 28 – 10 am to Noon

Kids At Risk: Health of Immigrant Children in NYC. Wolff Conference Room, 65 Fifth Avenue, 2nd floor (btw 13th & 14th streets. Free. Call 212 229 5418 or email pradi703@newschool.edu to reserve a seat.

Thursday, April 29 – Noon

"Rural Sprawl: Impacts on Agriculture and Protected Areas" by Barb Cestero, Program Director at the Sonoran Institute. Sage Hall, 205 Prospect St, New Haven, at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. Lecture is Free.

Wednesday May 5, 2004 – 4:30 pm

"Aviation: The State Of The Industry And Its Future." Keynote speaker: Arlene Feldman, FAA regional administrator. Cuny Aviation Institute At York College, 94-20 Guy Brewer Blvd., Jamaica, Queens. Info www.york.cuny.edu/aviation or call 212-435-4431.

Tuesday, May 11 – 8:00 am

Regional Partnerships in Transportation: Learning from and Building Upon Success. Rudin Center for Transportation Policy & Management. Kimmel Center Eisner and Lubin Auditorium, New York University, 60 Washington Square South, 4th floor. More information: 212-998-7545 or www.nyu.edu/wagner/rudincenter.

Friday, May 14

"From Practice to Theory:" Conference on the future of a sustainable construction industry in NYC region." At the CUNY Graduate Center, 34th St. and 5th Avenue, Manhattan. See <http://www.cuny.cuny.edu/cius/conference.htm>. Cost \$25. Scholarships available. To register contact 212 817-8215 or continuing@gc.cuny.edu

Tuesday, June 8

Downtown New Jersey, Back to the Future, Lafayette Marriott, Trenton, New Jersey. DNJ's annual conference this year will focus on planning for the future of downtowns by bringing back the past. www.downtownnj.com.

