

Print Spotlight

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Planning for Governors Island is Moving Ahead. Really.

Stories about planning for Governors Island have a certain déjà vu all over again quality. Since 1996, when the Coast Guard announced it was quitting the 172-acre Island, the public has borne witness to a number of positive pronouncements. From early floaters about casinos to suggestions of CUNY campuses, government statements about the future of the Island have been great for demonstrating progress but short on concrete commitments.

So the recent announcement of four conceptual plans and a new decision-making schedule by the Governors Island Preservation and Education Corporation (GIPEC) - starting with a public meeting the evening of October 19th - has met with some skepticism on the part of media and civic pundits. Still, hope springs eternal. And there are some positive signs that things are moving forward and that election season meetings will lead to post-election budget and real estate commitments.

Helping build momentum for action is the simple fact that Governors Island is a truly spectacular place. No visitor to its shady paths, monumental stone forts, or Harbor sunsets comes away feeling the same about New York. Five minutes from Lower Manhattan or Brooklyn, the Island is a world apart.

This near-yet-far quality both endears and challenges prospective tenants. The trick has always been to come up with the right set of uses that match its islanded charm, the 1.2 million square feet in the Island's National Landmark and City Historic District, and public commitments to parkland, including a minimum 40-acre City/State park and a 22-acre National Monument.

The essential program for the Island, developed and refined through a half dozen public and private planning studies (including one by Regional Plan Association in 1998), is well established. The Island is to become a great civic space, with a suite of hospitality, education/research, recreation, and cultural uses. Private residential use is prohibited for policy, fiscal, and legal reasons (i.e. prospects of privatization, expensive demands for public services, and the \$1 valuation by federal appraisers). This overall concept and the political consensus it represents is memorialized in the federal/city/state memorandum of understanding and the deed restrictions that accompanied the Island's transfer from the federal government. Its latest expression is in the "Development Framework" and the four conceptual plans developed by a team led by Robert Charles Lesser Company in association with Ehrenkrantz Eckstut & Kuhn Architects and Urban Strategies, Inc (see http://www.govisland.com/development_framework.htm).

What has always been missing is some substantial political and financial certainty. Without this roadmap, it has been difficult to realize any real private sector interest. According to GIPEC, the 90 proposals garnered by its recent Request for Expressions of Interest delivered some good ideas and some potential partners but no real answers, exactly what one might expect from a solicitation that carried with it no actual commitments by either government or the private respondents.

What the Island needs is for the City and State to set and deliver on specific political, financial, and planning milestones. More than just about any other development project in this city, and with its historic structures subject to coastal conditions and decay, Governors Island demands that government instill some confidence in the private sector. Finding that right anchor tenant is surely important; but it is worthwhile remembering that Battery Park City and scores of other large successful development projects took a generation or so to build out, requiring a little faith and some risk-taking on the part of their public stewards. What was especially critical to the success of Battery Park City was the front-end investment by the State in parks, infrastructure and the waterfront esplanade.

The recent movement by GIPEC contains some positive news in this regard. There is a welcome recognition that the City and State will have to contribute to the Island's infrastructure up front in order to attract private sector capital. A realistic timetable has been set out, with a draft plan due this winter, and a developer RFP in the spring. Perhaps most importantly, Deputy Mayor Dan Doctoroff has assumed the duties of Chairman of GIPEC, promising that his energetic style and the Mayoral support he enjoys will galvanize the three parties at the helm of GIPEC (Mayor's office, Governor's office, Empire State Development Corporation).

But having confidence that recent declarations are not just election-year promises requires more. The Mayor and Governor need to memorialize their political and financial commitment to redeveloping the Island, much in the same way that this Governor and the past Mayor stood up and committed to building Hudson River Park and Brooklyn Bridge Park. This positive affirmation must be followed by a substantial budgetary commitment in FY 07. The City and State must deliver not just the \$30 million more that they recognize is needed to prevent historic structures from falling into ruin, but a substantial down payment on the \$300 million or so estimated to be needed to recreate the Island's public infrastructure. A good place to start spending this money is on building the parks and public spaces required by the memorandum of understanding signed with the federal government. As with Battery Park City, these public spaces can articulate and enhance development opportunities while providing for public open space and even revenue producing interim activities.

Finally, landing some early uses - like the existing public Harbor High School, educational programs, and special events - will keep Governors Island in the public's eye while helping to rehabilitate its structures. Just as important, this vitality and associated services will make the Island more, not less attractive, to other prospective tenants. As Yogi Berra might say in his famously confused way, this should make planning for the future move forward faster.

- Robert Pirani is RPA Director of Environmental Programs and Executive Director of the Governors Island Alliance civic coalition (www.governorsislandalliance.org). GIPEC's timetable and latest concept plans for the Island will be discussed at a Public Meeting on October 19 (see calendar for details).

Grabbing Credit and Blame in Giuliani's Wake

It is impossible to know what New York would be like if Rudolph Giuliani had never been mayor. But it is clear that the city was a much better place when he left than when he entered, putting aside the catastrophic events of 9/11. The city was cleaner, safer, and more prosperous. While some claim to miss the city's seediness of decades past, I don't.

But can Giuliani claim credit for the city's better fortunes? The answer is important, because judging the mayor of the nation's largest city implicitly leads one to judge the job of mayor in general, both in this region and across the country.

Fred Siegel, a professor of history at Cooper Union and a frequent commentator on the city, believes Giuliani does deserve the credit, at least in large part. In his recent book, *The Prince of The City: Giuliani, New York and The Genius of American Life*, Siegel makes the dull details of politics and governance exciting by housing them within the dramatic tale of "the Prince - Rudy Giuliani - and his small band of loyal followers" who take on the chaotic, confused and sometimes downright evil forces of entrenched liberalism. As with any quest, the going is tough at times, and the forces of darkness threaten the forces of light, but eventually Siegel's hero Giuliani triumphs and with him the city. According to Siegel, Giuliani proves that America's largest city is indeed governable, and that the individual willing to buckle down, work and "play by the rules" (to quote Bill Clinton, who was stylistically so different than Giuliani but quite similar in his policies and political philosophy), has a place in New York.

"Giuliani first saved the city from its own, apparently intractable, political pathologies well before he saved the city and country from the panic that could have followed the 9/11 attacks," Siegel says in his Preface. "Time and again, from reducing crime and

welfare, to driving the mob out of the garbage industry and reforming the City University, he achieved what the conventional wisdom had assumed was impossible. The third and by far the least known of his extraordinary accomplishments was to revive the idea of upward mobility for the poor in a city whose economy had been organized around servicing poverty."

Using this story line as a guide, Siegel leads a reader through a history of the city in modern times. The first 100 pages of the book cover the Koch and Dinkins administrations. Then Siegel covers Giuliani's two terms, stopping for chapters on policing, major news events and election brawls, culminating in Giuliani's dramatic acts of leadership after the attacks on the World Trade Center. It's a great tale, and I for one applaud Mr. Siegel's willingness to write history as drama. Too many academics, whether from lack of skill or lack of respect for more literary history, drop the reader into a morass of facts and anecdotes with little over-arching narrative. Siegel's history, filled with names, dates and events in the context of a thesis-driven story, stands as the Giuliani book to beat.

But acknowledging all of that, is Siegel's thesis essentially correct? Or does he give Giuliani too much credit, and not enough blame? I believe it is the latter. While the city was in much better shape when Giuliani left, it's also true that New York had been generally reviving since the early 1980s. That's when the city, through courageous political and civic leadership, began repairing its broken transit system, its stock of abandoned housing and its worn-out and abandoned parks, and tackling its crime.

Overall, I had the sense that Siegel bent the narrative his way in the recounting of events and committed what commentator Michael Kinsley has called "a false paraphrase" of events. I wished at times to have a narrator from a different point of view to recount, for example, the tense dealings between School Chancellor Raymond Cortines and Giuliani, to see whether there would be any major differences with Siegel. To cite a mundane example, Siegel tells how Giuliani received criticism for erecting barriers on Midtown avenues in order to stop people from jaywalking and to insure that pedestrians obeyed traffic laws. But I remember those barriers, and I would have described them as being erected primarily to limit pedestrian access to a major avenue to allow cars to make turns without being blocked by crossing pedestrians. Siegel's account puts the emphasis on Giuliani the law enforcer, while mine focuses on Giuliani the man who preferred New Yorkers in cars to those on the sidewalks.

The telling of these smaller events makes up Siegel's larger point that Giuliani reversed the city's fortunes for the better. But there are competing narratives. The one I find the most credible is simply that the ebbs and flows of New York City's fortunes have more to do with those of the stock market and the financial industries in general, than the priorities of its leaders. The stock market languished in the 1970s, and so did New York. It revived in the early 1980s, and so did New York. It languished in the early 1990s, as did New York, before exploding in the rest of the decade, as did the city economically. Siegel notes astutely that the stock market rebounded in the 1990s several years before New York City did, but there is nearly always a lag between turns in the market and the larger economy.

Giuliani's signature achievement while mayor was the dramatic reduction in crime, which has made the city, in particular in its outer boroughs, so much more livable. Academics and commentators of all stripes have claimed to know the real reason crime went down, citing things from changing demographics to the end of the crack epidemic. The latest explanation comes from economist Steven D. Levitt and the journalist Stephen J. Dubner, who make a plausible and controversial pitch in their best-selling *Freakonomics* that legalizing abortion in the early 1970s was primarily responsible for New York City's dramatic drop in crime in the 1990s. Siegel, in a lengthy footnote, discounts most of the competing explanations and credits Giuliani's policing policies and general attitude-change that gave the police more respect and individuals less tolerance for deviant behavior. The arguments are too varied to get into here, but to me it seems safe to say that Giuliani deserves some credit for the reduction in crime, but not all or most of it.

-Turning from what has gone well with the city to what has gone wrong, I also thought Siegel erred in not assigning Giuliani more blame for the city's long-term fiscal mess, including high debt and an enormous backlog of unfunded infrastructure projects. In *Prince of the City* Giuliani generally comes across as a brave advocate of lean and efficient government. But Giuliani's fiscal record overall is similar to that of President George W. Bush. Like President Bush, Giuliani spoke against government while dramatically increasing government spending in his last few years. Giuliani's insistence on corporate giveaways and on cutting taxes, even during the economic good times of the late 1990s, insured that the city would be left with the burdens of debt it is still struggling with. Siegel mentions this, but the facts don't stand out in his overall story. Part of these misplaced priorities is shown in Giuliani's treatment of the region's amazing mass transit system, which the mayor never seemed to appreciate.

Giuliani reduced city funding for the system, and helped insure defeat for the 2000 transportation bond through his lukewarm endorsement of it (hopefully Mayor Bloomberg will be a more forceful supporter of this year's critical bond act). Giuliani never "got" that effective infrastructure was part of the foundation for the city's prosperity.

So what if Giuliani had never been mayor? It's clear that Giuliani, like every politician, rode the tide of history he had been given. President Bill Clinton and a Republican Congress reformed and restructured welfare, and Giuliani implemented such policies aggressively in New York City. The stock market boomed in the 1990s, and Giuliani had the luxury of increased revenue in his later years, much of which he wasted. But surely Giuliani made some things different almost entirely on his own. I suspect the City College of New York would not have implemented higher admission standards without Giuliani's leadership. I suspect crime would be higher today without Giuliani's leadership, even if still lower overall, because Giuliani's policing policies did change the city for the better.

In general, Giuliani's biggest achievement was changing the culture of expectations around the mayoralty. New York City is no longer thought of as ungovernable. Mayor Bloomberg, under whose tenure crime has continued to drop, would have had a far tougher time if not preceded by Giuliani. Siegel makes the case that Giuliani was a great mayor, but he has opened the door for another scholar to make a less flattering case. One such book may be Robert Polner's recently released *America's Mayor: The Hidden History of Rudy Giuliani's New York*, which is reportedly much more critical.

– Alex Marshall, Editor, *Spotlight on The Region*.

Questions Or Comments On What's In This Issue? Send Them To The Editor Of Spotlight On The Region, Alex Marshall At alex@rpa.org

Calendar

Tuesday, October 11th, 6:00 - 8:30 p.m.

The Civic Alliance, with the LMDC and the WTC Memorial Foundation, will host a public workshop to review preliminary plans for the World Trade Center Memorial Museum. At the NYU Conference Center in the Woolworth Building, 15 Barclay Street, 4th Floor, in Lower Manhattan. The workshops are free but registration is encouraged. Register by calling 212-253-2727 x 317 or visiting www.civic-alliance.org.

October 18

The 6th Annual Tri-State Transit Symposium Critical Issues: National and Regional Transit Security and the Financial Future of Transit in the Region, 8:30 a.m. – 12:45 p.m. Kimmel Center, Rosenthal Pavilion at New York University, 60 Washington Square South, 10th Floor. Hosted by the Rudin Center for Transportation Policy & Management, Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. The focus of the symposium will be "National and Regional Transit Security and the Financial Future of Transit in the Region." To register, email mnn2@nyu.edu or call (212) 998-7545.

October 19

The NYS Department of State, Division of Coastal Resources is pleased to announce the [NYS Community & Waterfront Revitalization Conference](#), October 19, 2005, in Farmingdale, New York. Sessions focus on heritage centers and corridors as keys to successful communities. Conference information and registration is available at: www.nyswaterfronts.com/Conference2005.html.

October 19, 5:00 – 8:00 p.m.

The Governors Island Preservation & Education Corporation will hold a Public Meeting to discuss current findings and potential opportunities for the redevelopment of Governors Island. The meeting will provide the public with the opportunity to offer ideas and comment on the possible uses for Governors Island. Fashion Institute of Technology, The Great Hall, 27th Street between 7th and 8th Avenues, Manhattan. Additional information is available at www.govisland.com.

October 19th, 20th and November 7th

RPA, the US Forest Service, the University of Connecticut and The Housatonic Valley Association of Connecticut will host public listening sessions to aid in the U.S. Forest Service study of the CT Highlands Region. Meetings will be held in New Milford, CT Torrington, CT and Falls Village, CT respectively. For more information, email rpiani@rpa.org.

Thursday, October 20th, 8:30 a.m. – 5:30 a.m.

Forum on the Future of New Jersey. "The Segregation of Wealth: What is it Costing

New Jersey?" Rutgers College Student Center, New Brunswick, NJ.
www.forumonthefutureofnewjersey.org.

Friday, October 21st, 5:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.

NJ Mayors' Institute on Community Design Keynote Address, President & CEO Shelley Poticha of Reconnecting America will speak on Transit-Oriented Development. This program is FREE and open to the public. Robertson Hall, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ.

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