

After Flushing West: A Collaborative New Vision For The Future

BY MICHAEL CHENG

Busting at its seams with foot traffic comparable to that of Times Square, 22 bus lines, the 7 train, and a LIRR stop, Downtown Flushing has the highest pedestrian count in all of New York outside of Manhattan. But an unreliable subway that breaks down on a regular basis, a subway platform that often gets so crowded it leaves commuters no place left to stand, and roads so crammed that drivers consider finding street parking a blessing — these are just a few of the nightmares plaguing Queens' most vibrant neighborhood.

Several community hopefuls were optimistic that the Flushing West Affordable Housing Rezoning Plan was the key to getting a spotlight shined on Flushing and paving the way for the city to begin funding long-time anticipated infrastructure improvements. But following the city's withdrawal of the Flushing West proposal, several community leaders are now in agreement that Flushing is in need of new vision, planning, and funding.

In June 2016, a Commercial District Needs Assessment of over 200 local organizations and businesses jointly conducted by NYC SBS (Small Business Services), the Greater Flushing Chamber of Commerce and Downtown Flushing BID revealed the top challenges facing the community: high commercial rents, congestion, lack of affordable parking, cleanliness, and the need for more governmental interagency collaboration and support to address these issues.

"Transportation infrastructure is at the forefront of issues to be tackled," said Assemblyman Ron Kim (D-Flushing). Council Member Peter Koo (D-Flushing) agreed that in

order for Flushing to reach its full potential as an international destination, "We need to improve infrastructure -- the subway, streets and sidewalks are too crowded, and that's why in the coming months, DOT will make the sidewalks nine inches wider on Downtown Main Street. But we still need to find ways to make the 7 Train more reliable."

Don Capalbi, President of the Queensboro Hill-Flushing Civic Association, suggested that in order to relieve some of the subway's congestion, the city could explore options of allowing Queens residents to ride into the city at an affordable cost on the LIRR track when the new plan lets it stop at the Grand Central Station. Relief of subway and traffic congestion is crucial to Flushing because its businesses rely heavily on tourists who come for the unique dining and shopping experiences as well as those who commute from all over the tristate area to see their doctors, lawyers, accountants and to do their grocery shopping.

Flushing has a unique and self-sustaining micro-economy, largely fueled by immigration. According to Flushing BID Executive Director Dian Yu, "During the financial recession of 2009, Flushing thrived through it and in the end, the business community

got even stronger. This is because we are not just a community where people can buy cheap [restaurant] food or do inexpensive grocery shopping, but it's a place where you can do everything you need to do without a car. The BID was created to solve some of the problems facing the business community, but a single organization like the BID can't fix everything — that's why we need everyone to work together."

While Flushing is widely considered by many to be the largest Chinatown in the Western world, some believe that its demographics are changing quickly. "There's a large prosperous Chinese population in Flushing, but the diversity of Flushing is unrivaled anywhere else," said Simon Gerson, President of the Greater

Flushing Chamber of Commerce.

"It has to do with the fact that Flushing has already become a world-class destination and people come here from all over the world. I tell my friends if you want

to see the future, come to Flushing. Flushing is what America is and will be, and it's a great thing."

Several staple community centers or nonprofits, such as the Flushing Y and Greater Flushing Chamber of Commerce, are witnessing explosive growth. Established in 1926, the Flushing Y's membership has increased by nine percent year-over-year for the last two years. According to Executive Director Jen Silvers, "It also seems as though greater Flushing's population is becoming more gentrified, as our constituency is now becoming more ethnically diverse." Council Member Koo added, "I would like to see the gentrification of Flushing continue as it is important for the development of a diverse community as well as for tourism."

Real estate development has played a critical role in attracting this new growth and diversity. F&T Group is arguably the most prolific Flushing developer, with over five million square feet of projects being planned or already under construction. When asked about their vision for Flushing 10 years from now,

F&T Executive VP Helen Lee replied, "Forget 10 years, Flushing will be dramatically different in just five years. We've curated each of the commercial tenants in all of our projects, a process which is essential in reshaping the dynamic of our community."

So if development is so important to the Flushing community, then why was the Flushing West proposal withdrawn? According to Council Member Koo and Assemblyman Kim's public statements, the original Flushing West Affordable Housing Plan threatened to further increase the population density of Downtown Flushing without addressing its urgent need for infrastructure improvements.

Flushing has historically grown on its own, without government accommodations such as special tax breaks and substantial rezonings, such as incentives provided for in Manhattan's Hudson Yards or [pending] Midtown East rezoning. "I commend Council Member Dan Garodnick's Midtown East rezoning plan, which was a first of its kind. Perhaps Flushing needs a similar plan, one that allows the city to create a budget for infrastructure improvements paid for by a combination of public and private money. The budget could be monetized by selling valuable air rights to developers which [theoretically] could be created out of thin air," said former City Comptroller John Liu.

Is Liu onto something? With all the recent talk about the rezoning of Flushing West and overpopulation in Downtown Flushing, there hasn't been much talk about other parts of Flushing. Theoretically, rezoning other parts of Flushing could reduce crowding in Downtown Flushing by directing people away from Downtown, while more importantly allowing the city to sell air-rights from city-owned properties to developers. The unsold air-rights are an untapped gold mine, as the profits from these air-rights sales could result in hundreds of millions of dollars for said infrastructure improvements.

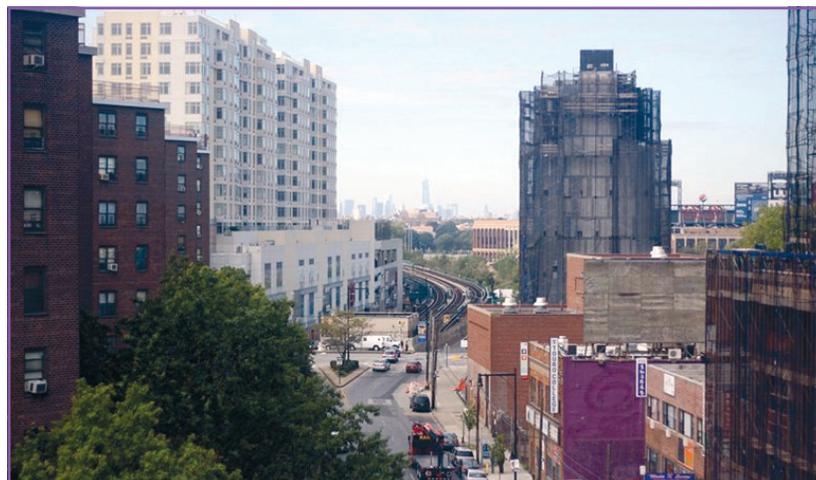
Just like Manhattan or Shanghai, Flushing (which is a junior hybrid of both), has all the necessary ingredients for it to evolve into one of the most desirable places to live in the 21st century. But with congestion and lack of city funding at the root of many of Flushing's other problems, its growth may be approaching a bottleneck. Perhaps the solution to these problems will be found not in the Flushing West Rezoning, but in a new rezoning plan that will address other areas of Flushing.

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The death of the Flushing West plan leaves questions over what the future of the Northeast Queens commercial hub will entail.

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