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Many Thrilled to Blow Ratner's Horn - 2nd Public Hearing Fails to Draw Significant Crowd On Primary Day

By Stephen Witt

Now even God is on developer Bruce Ratner's side.

At least that seemed to be the opinion of one Orthodox Jew, who testified in favor of Ratner's proposed Atlantic Yards project at last week's public forum on the issue.

"He's (Ratner) such a mensch that I brought him a present," said Menachem Friedfertig of Crown Heights, pulling out a ram's horn traditionally blown on the Jewish New Year from a cardboard box.

"I'm giving it to Bruce Ratner that he should blow it on the Nets opening day at the new arena," he added.



Menachem Friedfertig, an Orthodox Jew from Crown Heights blows a ram's horn. He gave the ram's horn, traditionally blown on the Jewish New Year, to developer Bruce Ratner to blow on opening day of the proposed arena should the New Jersey Nets move to Brooklyn. Photo by Tammy Meadows

Friedfertig explained that he bought a property at 622 Pacific Street sight unseen several years ago only to find out it was an empty garage.

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Friedfertig said he was worried that he made a bad investment, but his wife told him that it was in God's hands and something good will come of it.

Several months later he learned the property was in the footprint of the proposed Atlantic Yards project and Ratner wound up purchasing it for an excellent price, recalled Friedfertig.

The meeting, held at the New York City College of Technology (Klitgord Auditorium), 285 Jay Street, drew a sparse crowd of about 125 people – a far cry from the first public meeting which was packed with people spilling out onto Jay Street.

The Empire State Development Corporation (ESDC) held the forum, which was the second of three meetings on the issue.

Specifically, the ESDC is holding the meetings as part of the state review process on the project, which offers the public a period of time to comment both orally and in writing on the project's 1,400-page Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS).

At last week's meeting, it was mainly proponents of the project who spoke. This may have been partially due to opponents of the proposed project calling a boycott of the forum because it was held on primary day, September 12.

Among other proponents who spoke were Anne Rascon, executive director of Nontraditional Employment

for Women (NEW), which advocates for women in the construction trade.

“This year we will enroll 400 women into our program and we will transform them into union carpenters, painters, electricians, plumbers, among other trades,” said Rascon.

“Many of these women live in this community and will be part of the union workforce building this project from the ground up. Many of these women will also be living in the new housing that is such a major part of this development project,” she added.

Rascon said NEW enthusiastically supports the Forest City Ratner (FCR) proposal because it gives back to the community.

“We are advocating for this project because working families in this community, especially women with families, will benefit from the creation of new jobs and greater access to affordable housing,” said Rascon.

“We urge the residents of this community to support this project because it is a progressive model of urban development that combines affordable housing, jobs, landmark architecture, and a commitment to economic diversity for working families throughout this Brooklyn community.”

Also heavily supporting the project at the forum were union members from the construction trades, who praised FCR as a developer who always uses union labor.

Milton Densis, from Architectural and Ornamental Ironworkers Local Union 580 said his union membership needs jobs and affordable housing.

The Local 580 utilizes 34 percent minority contractors and also actively recruits youths and minorities in apprenticeship programs, Densis said.

Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce President Kenneth Adams said the chamber supports the project based on two surveys on chamber members confirming a majority of these members supported it.

“We have found that business owners across the borough support Atlantic Yards for different reasons. For example, many are clearly enthusiastic about the arena and its function as the new home of the New Jersey Nets. Many of these Brooklyn business owners look forward to the economic benefits of a new sports and entertainment arena in Brooklyn,” said Adams.

Adams said other business owners support the project for the affordable housing and jobs that a \$4 billion investment in the borough can bring.

“I should add that some of our chamber members that are located near the site have expressed concerns about the project, but they have been meeting and working with the developer to address them,” Adams said.

“In our view, Forest City Ratner Companies has been responsive to these local business owners,” he added.

However, the forum also had people and organizations who were highly critical of the DEIS and the proposed development including Gib Veconi, chair of the Prospect Heights Neighborhood Development Council.

“The mitigations described in the Atlantic Yards DEIS fail to include the one mitigation which would affect the greatest number of project impacts, including traffic congestion, school overcrowding, loss of visual and historic resources, shadows, neighborhood character and more,” said Veconi.

“The Atlantic Yards project needs to be scaled down. Not by six or eight percent, but radically so, such that Prospect Heights is not made into an experiment in what happens when a developer creates a census tract

twice as dense as anything known in America,” he added.

Veconi was also critical of the DEIS touting the open space being planned, “even though the amount of open space per area resident would actually decline if the project was built.”

“Done properly, affordable housing and job creation can be real benefits to Brooklyn. However, our community requires a process that fairly evaluates the impacts to our neighborhoods and to Brooklyn as a whole,” Veconi said.

Deb Howard, executive director of the Pratt Area Community Council, said more subsidies should go into manufacturing jobs instead of to FCR, particularly at the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

Howard also lambasted the trade unions for not hiring enough minorities and said after construction, the FCR development would bring mainly lower-paying service jobs.

Finally, the development will hurt the small businesses along Fulton Street, Howard said.

The final forum on the DEIS is slated for between 4:30-8:30 p.m., this Monday, September 18 at the same location, the New York City College of Technology (Klitgord Auditorium), 285 Jay Street.

Originally the public comment period was to end on Sept. 22, 30 days after the first DEIS public hearing held on August 23.

However, the ESDC has extended the public comment period to Sept. 29.

If a final General Project Plan and EIS are approved, the project goes before the state Public Authorities Control Board for a final government approval.

To view the DEIS, GPP and related material, log onto www.empire.state.ny.us. Then click on the doing business link and again on the Atlantic Yards Project link.

For questions and comments, contact: Atlantic Yards c/o ESDC Empire State Development Corporation, 633 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017.

The phone number is (212) 803-3233 and the email is atlanticyards@empire.state.ny.us.