

OFF
THE CUF

By Jasper Goldman, David
Gratt and Juan Rivero

COMPLETING CONEY'S COMEBACK

Ten Suggestions for Making the 2010 Summer Season a Success

CONEY ISLAND GOT ITS FIRST JOLT OF GOOD NEWS IN YEARS THIS past December when the Bloomberg administration purchased six acres of land at the heart of the old amusement district and committed to set it aside as parkland dedicated to amusements in perpetuity. City officials then leased the site to the Italian ride manufacturer Zamperla USA, which plans to have several new rides and attractions in place by this summer—complementing existing attractions such as the Cyclone, Deno's Wonder Wheel Park, Coney Island USA and the New York Aquarium.

These are incredibly welcome developments for the "People's Playground" after a turbulent couple of years in which one of the area's two remaining amusement parks, Astroland, and a handful of other long-time attractions lost their leases and had to shut down. It's now critical to continue this momentum through the upcoming summer. After years of setbacks and negative press reports, a truly successful 2010 season could re-establish Coney Island as a thriving outdoor entertainment destination, potentially leading to more infrastructure investment, the expansion of the amusement area and a greater amount of programming in the future.

But making the 2010 season a success will require more than just a new amusement operator. City officials and other stakeholders will have to address several of the entrenched problems that have long undermined the area's appeal.

Fortunately, there is now a window of opportunity to begin solving these problems. After gathering input from several attraction operators, Coney Island stakeholders and other experts, we believe there are 10 simple steps officials could take right now.

1. Program Vacant Lots in Coney Island

Even with the arrival of Zamperla, there is still a large amount of public and privately-owned vacant land and parking lots that could be successfully programmed with rides, arcades and other temporary attractions (See the attached map). These attractions would bring additional visitors to Coney Island, increase the diversity of the district and benefit existing businesses. For example, in 2009, Ringling Brothers Circus brought tremendous excitement and crowds to Coney Island. A concerted effort should be made to ensure the circus returns in 2010 and to program more activity on land that would otherwise be vacant or underutilized.

2. Install Banners to Cover Inactive Lots

Coney Island's vacant lots create a perception of decay for visitors. Ideally, both private and public landowners would make their vacant property available for the types of activities described above. But where that's not possible, banners should be installed along the periphery so these lots no longer blight the area. These banners could be art installations arranged by a public art organization such as Creative Time or the Public Art Fund.

3. Increase Activity at Existing Sports Facilities

Coney Island's two major sports facilities, MCU Park (formerly known as KeySpan Park and home of minor league baseball team, the Cyclones) and Abe Stark Skating Rink are badly under-utilized. MCU Park hosts just 38 Cyclones games a year and the Abe Stark Rink is primarily used for league hockey and often not available for public use, especially during the summer.

More programming for both of these facilities would substantially increase attendance to Coney Island. For example, concerts at MCU Park often attract as many as 10,000 people. Boxing, professional wrestling and other events could also attract new crowds to Coney Island. Similarly, Abe Stark Rink could host indoor soccer, roller hockey and even non-sporting events, such as small conventions during the summer, when the ice sheet is not being maintained.

The city and private entities should explore how to increase activity at these facilities and make the necessary improvements to allow more diverse programming, such as temporary flooring to protect MCU Park's athletic field during concerts and other events.

4. Bring More Summer Events and Festivals to Coney Island

The Hot Dog Eating Contest, Mermaid Parade and Siren Festival bring well over a hundred thousand visitors to Coney Island. The city should partner with private

entities to create more of these special day or weekend long events, ideally one each in April, May, August and September. Possible events could include food and beer festivals, outdoor wrestling, dance exhibitions, dog shows, and performance art such as aerialists or trapeze artist displays. The city should move forward now by issuing a "Request for Proposals" for these kinds of events in both 2010 and 2011.

5. Extend Coney Island's Season

Coney Island's season should not end at Labor Day. Other amusement areas in cold weather climates organize outdoor events throughout the fall and into the holiday season to capture interest during the major holidays, including Halloween, Christmas and New Year's Eve.

In Coney Island, by contrast, most activity comes to a halt by October. The only significant off-season event in Coney Island is the New Year's Day Polar Bear Swim, which attracts thousands of visitors, demonstrating that people will come to Coney Island even in the dead of winter if there is something to see.

The city should work with private entities to create programs for the major off-season holidays, such as a Halloween Festival, a New Year's Eve celebration or an Oktoberfest beer garden.

The off-season success of Six Flags in New Jersey has demonstrated that there is a considerable untapped demand for year round amusements. But a major obstacle to extending the operation of rides at Coney Island is the off-season cost of electricity. The current electricity pricing structure for amusement operators penalizes them for their limited use of electricity during the fall and winter. The city and other key stakeholders should request that the Public Service Commission, a state regulatory agency, change the electrical rate structure to remove this disincentive from extending the season.

6. Provide Weekend Express Trains to Coney Island in Season

Long subway rides deter countless New Yorkers and tourists from traveling to Coney Island. During the week, the B train provides express service to nearby Brighton Beach, significantly reducing travel times between Manhattan and this part of Brooklyn. But there is only local service on the weekends, the very time when a quicker ride would entice more visitors to the amusement area. The city and private entities should work with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) to extend express train service through the weekend, even if only for the duration of the summer season. This service should be in place by June.

The city should also create a ferry service pilot pro-

Potential Sites for Interim Activities for Summer 2010



	Existing active attractions
	Partially programmed private spaces
	Partially programmed public spaces
	Potentially available private spaces
	Potentially available public spaces

Notes:
 Information on this map has been sourced from New York City's EDC and interviews with key stakeholders.

*Former Washington Bath Site was the 2009 site of the Ringling Brothers Circus which may return there in 2010.

**Former Thunderbolt Site needs improvement.

***This area of the beach is usually reserved for bathers.

° The availability of streets is subject to street permitting procedures.

∞ Zamperla's Stillwell lots will be under construction in 2010.

gram on select weekends to evaluate the feasibility and impact of expanded service. A ferry to Coney Island could make the trip a part of the attraction, enhancing the experience of a visit and luring visitors who might not otherwise go.

7. Make Coney Island More Visitor Friendly

Coney Island does not always feel welcoming to visitors. While Coney Island's unique character is undeniably bound up in its "honky-tonk" character, the amusement area could be made more welcoming without compromising its authenticity.

For example, the creation of information booths, staffed by volunteers similar to Big Apple Greeters, could go a long way towards making the amusement area more welcoming. Similarly, improved street lighting and sidewalk conditions would make visitors feel more at home. For example, the area adjacent to West 10th Street is so dark in the evening a lot of visitors feel uncomfortable. In addition, the sidewalks along West 21st Street and along Stillwell Avenue between Surf and Mermaid are in such bad condition pedestrians

sometimes have to step into the street to pass. Improving the streetscape with better lighting and functional sidewalks would make the whole amusement district more inviting.

8. Create a Coney Island Amusement Area Map

Visitors to Coney Island are often unaware of the full range of attractions that exist in Coney Island—from the New York Aquarium to the Dreamland Roller Rink. An easy to read, graphically compelling map that clearly indicates the location of the existing attractions and their opening hours, combined with a calendar of summer events, would make Coney Island a much more attractive and user-friendly destination. This map could be distributed by volunteers at the subway station and at information booths.

9. Extend Bathroom Hours and Improve Facilities

The availability and quality of the bathrooms in Coney Island is a major inconvenience for anyone who spends time there. The bathrooms shut at 6 pm even though rides and other attractions may stay open until mid-

night or later. Visitors also routinely complain about a lack of basic cleanliness and soap in the facilities. Problems with restroom availability are particularly acute during Easter, when the off-season has officially ended but the Parks Department facilities have not yet opened.

Closing the restrooms early during the season and failing to open them at all when the off-season ends in April sends the message to both visitors and local businesses that Coney Island is unsupervised during these times, and ultimately it discourages visitors from returning.

This could be easily addressed by ensuring that the Parks Department has sufficient funding to open their facilities earlier in the season, extend their hours and ensure they are kept to a high standard of cleanliness.

10. Promote Coney Island as a Tourist Destination

In recent years, Coney Island has not been promoted enough as a tourist destination. While some adventurous tourists do visit Coney Island, the overwhelming majority of visitors are from the metropolitan region. There is an enormous opportunity for Coney Island to capture some of the estimated 45 million international and domestic visitors that visit New York annually.

A concerted effort to promote Coney Island as a tourist destination could include a bigger and bolder marketing campaign for the summer of 2010. Billboards,

subway and bus ads could increase awareness on the part of visitors. Individual attractions, such as Ringling Bros, Zamperla's new amusement park—which they are calling Luna Park—and the Aquarium, could also combine their marketing efforts. Promotional materials for Coney Island—including the map described above—could be packaged with *Time Out*, *New York*, the *Village Voice* and other city magazines and newspapers at the beginning of the season, or it could be made available at Manhattan hotels and tourist information booths around the city.

CONCLUSION

2010 is a pivotal year for Coney Island. A successful summer season would help reverse perceptions that the area is in decline; it would banish memories of last summer's failure and set a new course for years to come.

The arrival of Zamperla USA, one of the world's premier amusement manufacturers and operators, is a critical first step but no guarantee of success. With its outstanding beach and boardwalk, unique attractions and extraordinary heritage, Coney Island has a phenomenal set of assets to build upon. But in order for it to truly flourish all of the area's stakeholders have to work together to create an environment with unique events and festivals, active lots, exciting rides, open bathrooms and a welcoming atmosphere.

Off the CUF commentaries are published periodically by the Center for an Urban Future. Alternatively written by outside experts and CUF staff, the commentaries aim to highlight critical opportunities and challenges facing New York and other cities, and generate fresh ideas for policymakers, business leaders and nonprofit practitioners.

This *Off the CUF* was written by Jasper Goldman, David Gratt and Juan Rivero, and edited by Jonathan Bowles and David Giles. Goldman is an urban planner currently based between New York City and Havana, where he is working on a series of videos about historic preservation. From 2004 until 2009 he worked at the Municipal Art Society as Senior Policy Analyst and managed the organization's ImagineConey visioning initiative. Gratt is an urban planner based in New York City. He holds a Master's Degree in urban planning from Columbia University and previously worked for the New York City Department of City Planning and Coney Island USA, a non-profit arts organization, where he served as Managing Director. Rivero is a Ph.D. student at Rutgers University. He holds a Law Degree from the University of Chicago and a Master's Degree in urban planning from Columbia University. He is the spokesman for Save Coney Island, an organization dedicated to restoring Coney Island as a world-class amusement destination.

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