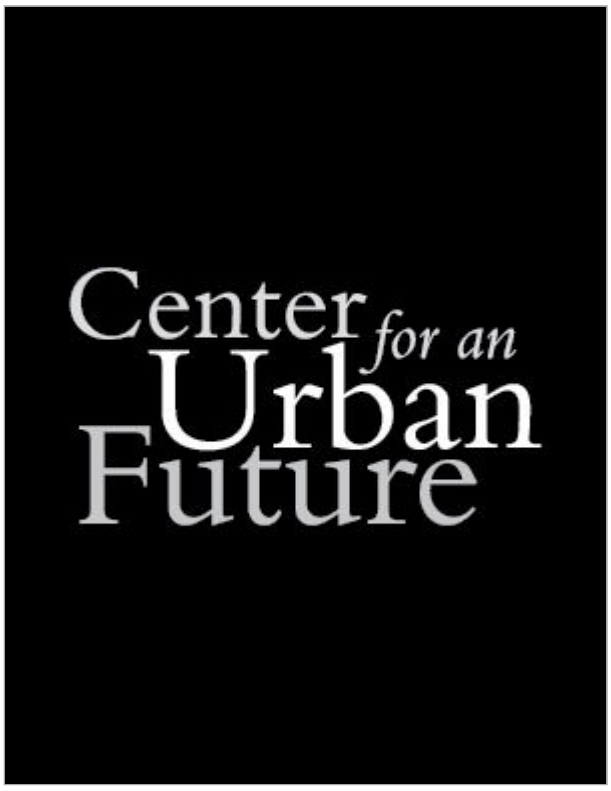


Commentary/Op-Ed - December 2004

Q&A With Susan Meeker

With Staten Island facing a number of hot-button development issues, CUF recently spoke with Susan Meeker, executive director of the West Brighton Community Local Development Corporation about development proposals for the North Shore waterfront, the borough's nightmarish traffic congestion, and more.

by Jonathan Bowles

After a decade in which its population grew faster than any other county in the state, Staten Island now faces both a number of opportunities for new development and a mounting list of problems that need to be addressed. With so many hot button issues pressing—-from proposals to develop parts of the vastly underused North Shore waterfront to unresolved questions about the borough's nightmarish traffic congestion—-Center for an Urban Future research director Jonathan Bowles went to find out what Susan Meeker, executive director of the West Brighton Community Local Development Corporation, sees ahead for Staten Island. Meeker, who is also on the executive committee of Staten Island Chamber of Commerce, has been at the helm of WBCLDC since 1983. This fall she helped secure approval for the creation of Staten Island's first business improvement district—-the Forest Avenue BID-—and her organization recently was named the borough's only satellite office for the U.S. Small Business Administration's Women's Business Center.

CUF: What do you think of Mayor Bloomberg's plan to develop the Homeport?

SM: I think they dusted off an old proposal that we all heard about 10 years ago. It basically says the same thing. The money that's been allocated [by the mayor—$66 million] should have been allocated back when the Navy was here. That's all infrastructure money—to take care of the bulkhead and to take care of Front Street and Bay Street, widening them and doing whatever they're going to do. This is stuff that has to be done and had to be done no matter what went there.

CUF: Why has it been so difficult to come up with a good plan for the Homeport over the years?

SM: The city says it's because they have not had many proposals that are financially sound and the people that had come in with their different proposals did not have a full package. That's definitely quite possible. But part of the reason they have not been able to attract someone that would come in and develop is because of the constraints on that property. And part of that is the infrastructure. [Developers] wanted to know what the government was going to do about the infrastructure before they

put their money down.

CUF: Many call the North Shore waterfront an untapped opportunity for Staten Island. What's been the problem?

SM: It could be a busy, wonderful waterfront. I think it's untapped because of transportation. It's very difficult to access that waterfront. Richmond Terrace runs along the North Shore waterfront and it's a very narrow two-lane [road] that wiggles and waggles its way along the coast. And although that makes it very nice if it were picturesque, right now we don't have much that you call picturesque along the waterfront. People are trying to change that. There is talk about the North Shore rail, which would be passenger rail. Hopefully that also includes some light transportation of manufactured goods. We're hoping that light rail will happen because it will make a big difference. It's difficult to get from one spot to the other on Staten Island, and transportation is the key issue. It's the thing that is keeping us from any major economic development, and that is not only for the North Shore; it's also the South Shore and mid-island. It's a problem for the whole island.

CUF: Is it just that the transportation infrastructure hasn't kept pace with population growth?

SM: Staten Island now has over 500,000 people. I moved to Staten Island 25 years ago, and I don't think we had 250,000 then. That's a big jump. We've had a lot of building on Staten Island, but it's all been residential. Some of this development has really taxed our infrastructure.

CUF: Has the traffic situation gotten so bad that it's stifling development and economic growth?

SM: Definitely. You can't get a worker from here to there easily. And that makes a big difference. One of the other things that I'm wound up about right now is the MTA. One of the best ways that we can help with the transportation problem is by making public transportation more accessible and making it work better. Accessibility, part of that is cost. Now, if I'm on Staten Island and it's going to take me ten minutes to get to my job by car, and maybe cost me $1.50 in gas, why would I take the bus which is going to cost me $2.00 and take me over an hour? Because the buses don't go from here to there; they go from here to the Ferry Terminal and then from the Ferry Terminal to there.

CUF: What should the MTA do?

SM: Years ago they promised us a third MTA depot out on the South Shore, and they said we can't have routes to the South Shore unless we have the depot. [Recently at a hearing, MTA officials] were saying – “well, we're not even thinking about it until 2009.” For the 20 years I’m here, I've been hearing about this. We need another depot. We need to be able to have more buses out there. We have to get people to take public transportation to get some of the cars off the road.

CUF: What else is keeping the waterfront from being developed?

SM: Another reason why the waterfront is underutilized is that [many of the sites] are potential brownfields, and there aren't any traditional bankers interested in taking on the risk of financing projects. So people have not been able to transfer properties. And nobody's going to come in with pockets full of thousand dollar bills to buy the property. On the other hand, a lot of the property owners think they are sitting on a goldmine, and they're asking extraordinary prices [to sell their land]. Recently, one piece was sold at a very good price to the Port Authority. Everybody now thinks that their land is worth the same as that piece. (The Port Authority bought it under their plan for community access—public access to the waterfront, and it's been deeded over to the [New York City] Parks Department.)

CUF: What is your vision for the North Shore waterfront?

SM: I'd like to see an esplanade that goes from the ferry terminal out at least to the Bayonne Bridge (I’d like to see it further, but let's just say to the Bayonne Bridge to start with) that allows public access for all of the residents, light rail and then environmentally friendly industrial businesses—businesses that bring jobs at all levels.

CUF: Some people say you can't really have recreational uses and industrial businesses.

SM: Well, let's just take a short drive to New Jersey. In Jersey you see industrial parks that don't look anything like our industrial parks in New York, because of the way the infrastructure is done. And they're well maintained and they become good neighbors. I think it can mix on Richmond Terrace because it's a very small area that would be industrial, and then you have a lot of residential buildings. There are loads of people living there that would love to have access to the water. So I don't see that it would be a problem. They don't have access now. They don't have anything now except to look at dilapidated buildings, vacant lots… What could be worse than what they have now?

CUF: Would it be a mistake to only have residential and recreational uses on the waterfront, with no commercial uses?

SM: You have to have industry. You have to have jobs. If you don't have jobs, then you're just a bedroom community. Bedroom communities do not generate a lot of taxes. Businesses generate a lot of taxes, especially in the city of New York, where the taxes on property especially residential property are so minor. That's why people stay in New York. New York City's tax structure needs to have industry. And if we've added over 200,000 people in the last 20 years, where are they working? Those people have to have jobs. Otherwise they're going to be going to Brooklyn, to Jersey and to Manhattan to work. And that's all making the transportation issue more difficult because they have to get there.

CUF: Are there any industrial sectors that are strong or have potential here on Staten Island?

SM: Yeah, marine industries. We're an island and we have several marinas that are full. If someone wanted to build a private marina and they had the capital to do it and do it right, that's a shoe-in because all of the marinas that are available at this time to the public are full and overpriced. Many Staten Islanders have to go to Jersey for a place for their boat, especially in the winter, when you have to have them put up on the land. So, marine, anything to do with marine is definitely something that can happen. Also, along the North Shore, we have dry docks for tugboats and barges. It's a big industry and it will grow, and it can grow. And it's actually an industry that isn't dependent on our infrastructure, as far as the streets are concerned.

CUF: There's talk about building a NASCAR racetrack on Staten Island. What do you think of this?

SM: I personally don't think it's right for Staten Island. Again, the major reason is infrastructure. How do you get there? Thousands of people come to it. Will it be a boon for some of the restaurants and possibly the hotels? Maybe. But 90 percent of the people that go will never set foot in one of the stores on Staten Island or in a hotel. They'll be in their RV that they filled with food. I don't see that it's going to be a big economic boost.

I also don't know what else can go there, and I think that's one of the things that we have to look at. If you're going to say no to something, let's be constructive and say what would be better. And I'm not sure, because the pave-and-wave works for NASCAR. They can just pave over that whole area. That [site] was a tank farm for Mobil Oil, so you've got all kinds of pipes and stuff that are still there that have to be taken care of, and there's all kinds of drippage from all of the petroleum products. So it's obvious—if that isn't a Superfund site, it is definitely a brownfield.

I'd rather see something that will benefit Staten Island.

CUF: Has the Yankees' minor league baseball stadium paid dividends for the borough?

SM: It hasn't paid dividends, but it's the most beautiful stadium. I take my grandchildren there and it's wonderful. You sit in those bleachers and you're looking at the most beautiful skyline in the world. Has it been used to its capacity? Not at all. They should have been having events there other than baseball, but there've been some hassles between the Yankees and the city as to when it can be used. It was also supposed to bring in more taxes than it has.

CUF: Has it led to new development of businesses outside of the ballpark restaurants, bars?

SM: No. People go to the game, get in their cars and go home. Or, if you live along the train, you get on the train, you take the kids on the train, you go to the game, then you get back on the train and you go home. And you go to the restaurants in different areas. We're not getting a lot of people from off Staten Island. If we were able to get a lot of people from off Staten Island to come, then the restaurants in that area, I think, would feel the boon.

CUF: How do you get more people from off the island to the ballpark and to other kind of venues on Staten Island?

SM: Well, I think one of the biggest problems we have right now is the condition of the ferry terminal. Thankfully, the good news is they're redoing it. The bad news is the years in the doing are difficult, because it's ugly. Who wants to walk around there? When that gets finished, [we need to] have the right outreach to get people off the ferry. And that can't happen just at the ferry terminal. You don't look at a sign in the ferry terminal and say: "Oh, I think I'll go the Botanical Gardens," because you've already planned your time for that day.

CUF: With so much focus on large-scale projects, are some of the smaller things needed to achieve economic growth being neglected?

SM: No, I think those things are happening. Take a drive out South Avenue. See Superior Chocolate, Adco Electric and the Hilton. There's a lot of good stuff going on there. There's good stuff planned down in Charleston. It just takes so much longer, and I think that's part of the culture—not necessarily of Staten Island, but of New York City in general. It takes a long time to get anything through.

CUF: So do you give high marks to the Bloomberg administration on economic development?

SM: Yes. And I think it has to do with Bloomberg himself, because he recognizes what it takes to be an entrepreneur. He's willing to talk about—-and back-—projects that are going to help people to help themselves.

CUF: Going forward, what should be the top priorities for local government officials to ensure economic growth on Staten Island?

SM: Transportation is the most important thing and we need to start planning for what will happen, not necessarily tomorrow, but in the next 10 to 20 years. And the only way to get that funding from the federal government and channeled through the state to the city, is if we work on it now and get it 10 years from now. It's the same thing with any plan within the city of New York—you can put it on the books, but it takes forever to make something happen. In addition to the transportation infrastructure, public transportation also needs to be addressed. Because I don't really feel that we're going to be able to attract new business to Staten Island unless we have those things in place or at least we're working on them and we can show people. So I think transportation, both public and vehicle transportation, and the infrastructure, those are the most important things. Without them we can't do the rest well.

CUF: What would you recommend for transportation planners going forward?

SM: Again, the rail on the North Shore. Also, SIEDC [the Staten Island Economic Development Corporation] has offered another plan that I thought really sounded right: taking another rail that would go from Tottenville, connecting with the Staten Island rapid transit train, and come across, down through Charleston and over the old Fresh Kills dump, and meet the North Shore rail right near the Bayonne Bridge. Now, the Bayonne Bridge was originally built with rail in mind and it has the infrastructure to be able to take light rail across. Now, why can't they take the light rail and put it across the Bayonne Bridge and connect with the New Jersey Transit?

The other thing, of course, is the tunnel that Congressman [Jerrold] Nadler's been dreaming about for the last 20 years. That

would also take the trucks off [the road]. And if you've ever been here during rush hour, it's a parking lot.



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