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Q&A with Wellington Chen: Is Flushing poised for future growth?

The Center recently took the Number 7 train to Main Street to ask Wellington Chen, a land use planner and former commissioner of the Board of Standards and Appeals, for his thoughts on Flushing's future.

by Jonathan Bowles

Few neighborhoods in New York have as much energy, and as much potential for growth, as downtown Flushing. With the neighborhood weighing a number of public and private sector development projects now on the drawing board, the Center for an Urban Future took the Number 7 train to Main Street to ask Wellington Chen, a land use planner and former commissioner of the Board of Standards and Appeals, for his thoughts on Flushing's future.

CUF: How'd you get involved in the urban development of Flushing?

WC: I was in my last year of architecture school and here was a live patient dying. Flushing was sputtering in the mid-70s and there was an open letter requesting assistance from the local Community Board. We did a lot of great things back then. We formed a Local Development Corporation, we did a multi-lingual shopping guide/map, and the Flushing Fantastic Street Fairs, where we closed off Main Street to cars, and a quarter million people came together to celebrate as a community.

CUF: What's your assessment of Flushing today?

WC: I'm a little dismayed that a quarter century later we are still inching along at the tarmac. I thought that we should have gotten a lot further than we are right now.

CUF: What's the problem?

WC: In a sense, what a lot of downtowns take for granted, those basic amenities are still missing in this community. It's something as basic as we don't have a men's health club, a movie theater. We don't have a decent bookstore, despite having the highest circulating branch library in the country. The pizza store is buried someplace here. So what you take for granted

to get a slice of pizza is a treasure hunt. In a nutshell, we have too narrow a spectrum of choices.

CUF: That seems strange, because you go out on Main Street and it's so busy.

WC: The problem is that Flushing has a very limited core. There are only a few blocks of streets in the downtown area that are zoned commercial. And, so, within those few blocks, we have to try to achieve what they envisioned half a century ago, which is that this is supposed to be the fourth largest retail district in the city. And, at one time, we were almost there. We had five department stores. But, because of the demise of the department store in general across the globe, we lost those opportunities.

CUF: So you think that Flushing could be more of a destination for people around the city, around the region, than it is now?

WC: Absolutely, I co-founded Destination Flushing, Inc. (a group working to improve the area) But I also have come to respect the market forces and recognize how tall an order that is. It's not necessarily that you build it and they will come. If you do shopper surveys, you will find that in affluent communities, the less affluent the poor, the middle class will go to that neighborhood to browse and shop. But the reverse is not true. An affluent shopper will not come into a neighborhood where they feel is less than up to their standards. That is a reality that we have to contend with, unless we can create a critical mass with a large variety of amenities to invite people to return. It's going to require tremendous work on behalf of everyone, and I mean everyone.

CUF: Assuming the community is able to improve the neighborhood's appearance and image, are there opportunities to develop more retail in Flushing?

WC: Northeast Queens is composed mostly of residential neighborhoods. The issue is how can we better service this quarter of million people [in the Flushing area], or 2 million people in the county of Queens. What is lacking in Flushing is what is lacking in Queens. We have very limited choices. Historically, across North America, there are 23 square feet of retail space per capita. In Queens, we only have 4 square feet [per person]. The shopping revenue goes out of the county, out of the city. And Nassau County, in the last 25 years, was built up on our blood. Our shopping revenue goes there, the sales tax revenue goes there. And that money should have been in this community to pay for the teacher salary increases, to build schools, to maintain parks, to fund cultural activities, to build waterfront promenades and senior centers.

CUF: It sounds like you'd like to see significant new commercial development.

WC: It really is not about development for development's sake, but in light of our current situation, where almost everyone is dissatisfied with the environment. We need to improve and maintain the viability of our core. Do we really want our CBD to be a central business district or a central bedroom district? The job creation formula is that every 300 square feet of office space or every 500 square feet of retail space creates a new job. And retail is ideally suited for this county, in that you don't need a Ph.D. to operate a retail service job. And our underemployment rates are high. That's why I'm a little concerned about putting all the eggs in one basket, in a sense that everyone is building housing. And I'm a housing advocate. But you could build a 15-story apartment building, and how many jobs do you create? A one shot deal and we have sacrificed our core; we have sacrificed our commercial base. If I tried to invite you back to downtown and say, wait you've got to look at this apartment building," you'll tell me no thanks." You've got to give me more of a reason for wanting to return to downtown, to shop, to eat, to stroll, etc. A raison d'être!

CUF: Why is Flushing the natural place for all of this commercial activity?

WC: From Flushing going east to Great Neck, there's not another zoning for C4-2 [a zoning designation that allows for moderate commercial and residential development]. There's a little strip by the LIE [Long Island Expressway] where the Kmart used to be, and that's about it. Whereas here, at Shea Stadium, there are about 9,000 parking spots, 98 percent of the

time unused. You have 23 bus lines, two major rail lines. Flushing is accessible by land, by sea, by air. It is the geographical heart of Queens!

CUF: But with such a limited core, how does Flushing grow?

WC: In my 25 years of banging my head against this wall, I've come to realize that a solution for Flushing lies west of the Flushing River - as the Department of City Planning correctly pointed out decades ago. This river has two banks, but until the other bank is decided, we are in a sort of limbo—we can't clap with one hand. The western Flushing area is in a harsh industrial zone, it is rather isolated. The majority of people do not live there. The western side has no amenities and no reason for anyone to visit.

Another reason why the western region of Flushing suffered a 30 percent loss in population during the 1990s is because we also have a bleeding gum: the waterfront. One unfortunate geographical limitation of Flushing is that the waterfront drops 30 feet from College Point Boulevard. What you see across the way is not the Manhattan skyline. You see what is directly across the river in Willets Point, which are full of junkyards and piles of construction debris. Will it eventually become a legacy of piles or a pile of legacies is the ultimate question for this city.

CUF: The Bloomberg administration is now looking to redevelop this waterfront. What do you think?

WC: The Bloomberg administration deserves tremendous credit for tackling a hot potato that no one in the past half of a century wants to handle. Robert Moses had a grand plan for this area before he passed away, and right after the World's Fair of 1964, that area was designated as parks. But it was rescinded. And so, from then onwards, every attempt in the last 40 years to clean up that area has been met with no success, whether it's Mario Cuomo, after he became governor, or [Mets owner] Fred Wilpon wanting to rebuild the area. It requires a tremendous effort, because the area has no sewer. The area also lacks infrastructure. Ultimately, it is a matter of wills. If there is a will, there is a way.

CUF: Is it just a matter of cleaning up the waterfront?

WC: No, the critical issues have always been about walkability and connectivity. A number of studies and workshops have concluded that there is a need for a pedestrian bridge, or multiple bridges over the Flushing River. And that requires leadership. That requires coordination of both banks of the river. It requires an overall plan with timetable for implementation. It is not just any bridge, the consensus was for an iconic bridge, a modern sculptural Ponte Vecchio, to connect and to complete the waterfront loops from Flushing River to the World's Fair Marina.

CUF: It sounds like you see the connection to Willets Point as a vital component in Flushing's growth?

WC: People think that Flushing is the heart of this area. In reality, many have recognized that the Shea Stadium area is the heart. Willets Point is the heart. And Flushing is the eastern lung and Corona and Eastern Elmhurst and Jackson Heights are the western lung.

CUF: What else needs to happen for Flushing?

WC: We need to go beyond studies. Every time this community wants to do something, we say: let's do another study. There's been studies galore dating back to 1946, and not a single master plan has ever been implemented, dating back to 1946. The implementation is the difficult part. A downtown is a life organism, and you've got to respond to changes and you've got to adapt. And so you constantly need someone at the helm, to steer with the wind or against the wind, or whatever the town decides to do. And, so, that is a quintessential requirement [for Flushing] to go forward. In general, the successful downtowns tend to have an organization, an entity, what I call a mother figure.

CUF: Downtown Flushing has a new Business Improvement District (BID). Is that the answer?

WC: For the first time in two decades we have a BID. That's great, and that is a basic first step that most people take for granted. But a BID is not the ideal mechanism in my mind. A BID for an area like Flushing will always be playing catch up. The Flushing BID has two major principles that it's going by: Keep it simple and keep a bare bone budget. First keep the streets clean, and do some promotion of the area. By its nature, it cannot handle the vision and the planning and the proper execution of all the other things that are beyond its mandate.

CUF: In other words, you need an entity that can undertake projects that also incorporate nearby places like College Point, Shea Stadium and Flushing Meadows Park.

WC: The top priority is to define a boundary that says: these are the areas that we want to take a look at, these are the areas that will have tremendous long-range implications for this region and for this county and for the city. And that requires you to have a much broader view. A BID is rather limited.

CUF: How helpful has the Bloomberg administration been in addressing some of these issues in Flushing?

WC: I think they went a step beyond [previous administrations], and that should be complimented. For the first time, a giant task force was put together and [the city] put in the resources and we had multiple workshops and consensus building to arrive at a document, [which has been] published for all to see and to follow.

CUF: Beyond Flushing, what are some of the fundamental challenges in Queens for the economy going forward?

WC: We've got to get up on our feet. If the county of Queens were to become a city, it would be the fifth largest city in the United States. It's larger than Houston. This county used to think on a very different level. The two World's Fairs generated each time over 50 million visitors. We used to think on a global level. We used to compete on a global level. We need to get back on that mold.

CUF: Should the city's government and business leaders be thinking of Queens, and all the boroughs outside of Manhattan, as engines for growth?

WC: Financial advisors always tell us to diversify, to avoid putting all your eggs in one basket. This is why Mayor Bloomberg made a smart move. He came from a financial background and he understands this. Our heavy reliance on the Wall Street area is not the solution. So that's why I thought it was an intelligent approach to diversify, and the way you diversify is to engage the other boroughs. And, the boroughs, with the right public policy and the right guidance, could be tremendous economic generators. This administration recognizes that there needs to be a five-borough strategy. Each one is unique. The Bronx and Staten Island are different than Queens. Brooklyn and Queens share some similar characteristics. But each on its own is a different city. By using an integrated strategy, this could go a long way.



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