



Commentary/Op-Ed - August 2004

Unforced Error

The absence of any meaningful effort to promote the Flushing section of Queens to the millions of tennis and baseball fans who visit every year represents a missed opportunity to give the neighborhood an economic boost.

by Jonathan Bowles

During the next two weeks, more than 600,000 people will stream into Flushing Meadows Corona Park in Queens to watch Serena Williams, Andy Roddick and many others compete in the U.S. Open. Unfortunately, if the past is any indication, only a tiny fraction of these tennis fans will venture over to downtown Flushing, the lively neighborhood that's just half a mile to the east of the tennis center.

One of the city's most vibrant cultural and business districts, downtown Flushing should enjoy a significant economic boost from the Open—not to mention the 81 games the New York Mets play each year at adjacent Shea Stadium. The Open is the highest-attended annual sporting event in the world, with between 615,000 and 620,000 people attending each year and as much as 40 percent of the total coming from outside the region. Add to that influx the more than 2.1 million fans that attended Mets games in 2003 (nearly 1.9 million have trekked to Shea so far this season, through August 29th). But local business and community leaders say it just doesn't happen. Instead, downtown Flushing is almost wholly disconnected from what happens at the U.S. Tennis Center and Shea Stadium, and it's not because the neighborhood is too far away from the action—it's just one stop away on the Number 7 train and a 10-minute walk over the Roosevelt Avenue Bridge. Much of the problem can be attributed to inadequate marketing.

"I think there are a lot of New Yorkers who just don't know what's there," says Marilyn Bitterman, district manager of Queens Community Board 7, whose boundaries include Flushing. "It's a shame because Flushing has a world of choices."

Part international business center and part culinary capital of Northern Queens, Flushing is culturally rich and ethnically diverse. The bustling streets around the Main Street subway station are lined with dozens of the best Chinese, Korean and Malaysian restaurants in the city, in addition to numerous bakeries, tea shops and food markets full of items not usually found at the local Pathmark.

While downtown Flushing has outstanding dining options, the immediate area around the U.S. Tennis Center and Shea Stadium is utterly devoid of restaurants and bars. Most fans opt for the overpriced and underwhelming food concessions

found inside each complex. That's good news for the Mets and the U.S. Tennis Association (USTA). But for the city and local businesses in Flushing—as well as Corona, a few minutes away in the other direction—it's a missed opportunity to capitalize on the enormous economic activity being generated at these sporting events.

“The biggest lost opportunity is the economic development potential for the city,” says Councilmember John Liu, who represents Flushing. “It's also a missed opportunity for Flushing and for the stadium goers, because they don't necessarily know what's available in the immediate area.”

It's likely that many more of those attending the U.S. Open and Mets games would spend some of their money in Flushing if they simply knew what the neighborhood had to offer. Even if it might be unreasonable to expect Mets fans to have dinner in Flushing after a night game that's unlikely to end until at least 9:30pm, the team has 28 afternoon games at Shea on its schedule this year. And the U.S. Open has afternoon sessions every day during its two-week run. The big problem is that there hasn't been any meaningful effort to promote Flushing to this audience. Fans won't see any ads about Flushing inside the tennis center or the Mets' ballpark, and even those arriving by subway won't encounter any promotional materials about the neighborhood while inside the Shea Stadium/Willets Point station.

Chris Widmaier, a spokesperson for the U.S.T.A., says that the U.S. Open features promotional information about the city in its program and media guide, but does not specifically market Flushing. Likewise, the Mets haven't helped to promote Flushing to their fans, says Tina Bucciarelli, the team's director of marketing. “We would welcome the opportunity to work with [the Flushing community],” says Bucciarelli, who notes that the Mets have worked with Flushing community leaders in the past to promote theme nights at the ballpark, like last week's “Asian Night” celebration.

“Flushing is not promoted enough,” says Fred Fu, president of the Flushing Development Center. “But it's not so easy. Most people, they don't know Flushing. They think it is a small town. People come from different places, and most times they watch the games and then go home.”

If anyone has tried to improve connections between downtown Flushing and the sports facilities in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, it is Fu. Last year, while head of the Flushing Chinese Business Association, he printed up fliers advertising restaurants in Flushing and handed them out to Mets fans entering Shea Stadium. But he just didn't have the resources for a sustained effort. “A thousand fliers is \$100,” he says, and the Mets typically draw between 20,000 and 30,000 fans per game, 81 times a year. “We cannot print so many.”

Unfortunately, Fu hasn't gotten much support from other business organizations. According to community leaders, neither the Flushing Chamber of Commerce nor the Queens Chamber of Commerce has made it a priority to create a marketing strategy that targets stadium goers in Queens. The Queens Economic Development Corporation (QEDC) hasn't done much either, but it is increasingly focused on promoting tourism in the borough, including in Flushing. One QEDC initiative should especially help the neighborhood: its Discover Queens Restaurant Week, a promotion designed to encourage people to eat at restaurants across the borough during October 4 through 8.

Ultimately, the Flushing business community has to step up to the plate. Marketing the area is a job ideally suited for the new Downtown Flushing Transit Hub Business Improvement District (BID), which came into existence in November 2003 and has already garnered praise for unifying what has long been a fractured business community. Thus far, the Flushing BID understandably has focused its limited resources on basic services like sanitation. But once it is able to spread its wings, the BID should logically concentrate on marketing its assets, an endeavor that several other BIDs around the city have already undertaken.

This should also be a no-brainer for the city. The Bloomberg administration's fervent support for the development of new stadiums for the Jets and Nets is largely based on the anticipated economic impact of those facilities, but city officials haven't yet made any real effort to pluck the comparatively low-hanging fruit of marketing downtown Flushing to the more than two

and a half million people who already attend events at the U.S. Tennis Center and Shea Stadium each year. (This is also true of Yankee Stadium in the Bronx, where local restaurants and other businesses derive very little benefit from the approximately three million baseball fans who annually pass through the House that Ruth Built.)

It is particularly disappointing that NYC & Company, the city's convention and visitors bureau, hasn't been up to, or interested in, this task. NYC & Company is currently marketing "The U.S. Open Restaurant Event," a promotion to encourage out-of-towners attending the Open to try out various restaurants in the city. But while the promotion, which is sponsored by American Express, includes discounts to 28 restaurants, all are in midtown Manhattan. And while the NYC & Company website offers visitors a list of restaurants by neighborhood, the site only includes nine restaurants in Queens and none of them are in Flushing.

The absence of efforts to promote the neighborhood to visiting sports fans is perhaps even more of a surprise since Mayor Bloomberg has taken the commendable step of making downtown Flushing a significant part of his economic development agenda. Though it has largely flown under the media's radar, the city's major economic development agencies have launched a comprehensive effort to improve the neighborhood's infrastructure and spur new development. City officials are hoping to ease traffic congestion, improve the downtown area's appearance, open up access to the now-unattractive Flushing River waterfront and create better pedestrian connections to Flushing Meadows Corona Park. If successful, these initiatives could go a long way towards making it easier, or at least more appealing, for people attending Mets games and tennis matches at the Open to visit downtown Flushing.

"We feel from the city's perspective that [Flushing] is a place that has a lot of potential and we can do things to build on that potential and help it become more of a center for northern Queens," says Jeffrey Oakman, a senior project manager with the city's Economic Development Corporation (EDC).

Oakman says that as the city begins moving from the planning phase into the implementation stage later this year, it will step up efforts to market the neighborhood. It is not yet clear what this will entail and whether it will specifically target fans attending the U.S. Open and Mets game; city officials are still "talking through ideas."

While it will come too late to make a difference during this year's U.S. Open and the remainder of the Mets' 2004 season, even a modest city commitment to promote Flushing could pay significant dividends for the local economy. As part of its effort, EDC should consider putting billboards or other signage that promotes Flushing inside the Shea Stadium/Willets Point subway station and near the entrances to Shea and the tennis center. It should also leverage support from the Mets and the U.S.T.A.

"I think [the Bloomberg administration] deserves a lot of credit for what they're doing so far," says Councilmember Liu. "But clearly a lot more progress needs to be made."

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