

City Is Backing Makeover for Decaying Brooklyn Waterfront



Frances Roberts for The New York Times

The view of Manhattan from Williamsburg may eventually change along with Brooklyn's waterfront.

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City officials agreed yesterday to let developers turn the decaying north Brooklyn waterfront, with its relics of Brooklyn's industrial past, into a neighborhood of residential towers with a parklike esplanade along the East River.

The plan, which rivals the ambition and scope of the creation of Battery Park City, would rezone a 175-block area of Greenpoint and Williamsburg, two neighborhoods that have surged in popularity because of their proximity to Manhattan but whose development has been curtailed because much of the area is now restricted to industrial use.

The area has become perhaps the most emblematic of Brooklyn's resurgence over the last few decades, as young people seeking an alternative to Manhattan have flocked to its once desolate streets, remaking Williamsburg into a hub of nightlife, art galleries and restaurants just one subway stop away from Manhattan.

That has propelled the local housing market, and led to intense pressure to develop acres of abandoned or underutilized properties near the East River that boast stunning views of Manhattan.

The rezoning, which was approved unanimously by a key City Council committee, would transform the long-crumbling waterfront into a residential neighborhood complete with 40-story luxury apartment buildings, shops and manicured recreation areas. As envisioned by city planners, the rezoning would help realize decades-long efforts to capitalize on one of New York's most ignored assets, its miles of neglected waterfront, while also protecting a neighborhood that has long been considered a repository for unpopular projects like power plants, waste transfer stations and porn shops.

"This rezoning will ensure that the reuse of this priceless but long derelict waterfront will be for the purposes of housing and recreation and not for such inappropriate uses as waste transfer stations and power plants," Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg told reporters at a late afternoon news conference.

The plan, which is expected to be approved by the full City Council next week, imposes some novel requirements for developers seeking to build the housing. In order to build to the maximum height of roughly 30 or 40 stories, they must keep at least 20 percent of the homes affordable to low- and middle-income New Yorkers, making it among the most ambitious such programs in the nation, city officials say. And the developers must build the waterfront esplanade, which will eventually be turned over for management to the city's Parks Department.

The rezoning in north Brooklyn is coming together as the city moves aggressively to spruce up its aging waterfronts, many of which have been in decline for more than a generation as New York's ports lost their prominence. Earlier this year, the city approved the rezoning of a huge swath of the Far West Side of Manhattan for office space and housing and has finally begun putting in place a plan to support a mix of uses, including a cruise ship terminal, on the Red Hook waterfront in Brooklyn.

But the north Brooklyn plan, whose final version came after intense negotiations between the City Council and Bloomberg administration officials, could yield one of the most extreme transformations of a neighborhood in decades. Inland from the water, the plan seeks to preserve the low-rise scale of the areas, where four- and six-story apartment buildings predominate, as well as the mix of light industry and residences.

To that end, the plan will designate a 22-block area near the Bushwick Inlet, just beyond the East River waterfront, as an Industrial Business Zone, which brings with it special protections and benefits for businesses operating or moving there, and create a \$4 million fund to preserve manufacturing jobs in the neighborhood.

The plan also creates 54 acres of parkland, including a 28-acre park with an Olympic-quality aquatic center on the river. The waterfront, though, will see the most striking change, and is the scene of the city's broadest test of inclusionary zoning, which allows developers to build larger buildings in exchange for setting aside some of the apartments as lower-cost units.

To take advantage of this bonus, developers on the waterfront must put aside 20 to 25 percent of their apartments for low- to moderate-income New Yorkers. In the city's calculations, for a family of four, low income is defined as earning up to \$50,250 per year, and moderate income is defined as \$50,250 to \$78,000.

In exchange, they will be allowed to put up larger buildings, capped at roughly 30 or 40 stories depending on the location, and they will be eligible for a 25-year tax exemption. Those developers are also eligible for certain grants for the public esplanades they build.

Those who do not include affordable apartments in their developments would be ineligible for the tax exemption. The size of their buildings would also be smaller, limited to roughly 23 or 33 stories, officials said. In the inland areas, there is also an inclusionary program, but it is smaller in scale.

Council members involved in the negotiations said that their modifications to the administration's plan will result in the construction of more affordable homes overall, about 33 percent of the more than 10,500 apartments anticipated from the rezoning.

In addition, Mr. Bloomberg said, the five major developers who own 70 percent of the property within the rezoning area reached an agreement with the city's main building service union to pay union-scale wages.

"In 10 years, I can't imagine what Williamsburg-Greenpoint is going to look like," said Councilwoman Melinda Katz, Democrat of Queens, who as chairwoman of the Land Use Committee led negotiations with Bloomberg administration officials.

City Councilman David Yassky, Democrat of Brooklyn, who represents much of the area, echoed that sentiment. "This is truly a transformative plan for New York City's waterfront," he said. Many residents and community advocates, though, have been opposed to the changes envisioned by the city, and some had lobbied for a guarantee that 40 percent of the new housing would be directed to lower-income residents. But several housing advocates watching the voting at City Hall praised city officials for including more lower-cost housing and open space in the plan.

"The communities off Williamsburg and Greenpoint win," said Brad Lander, director of the Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development, "because today there is a guarantee of new and permanently affordable housing, instead of a virtual guarantee that new development would price residents out of their homes."