

Beyond downtown: Brooklyn's economic future lies in far-flung neighborhoods

Federal grant will allow chamber of commerce to examine new possibilities for economic growth

By Will Bredderman



Photo: Flickr/AdamSaul

Industry City, isolated in Sunset Park, has still raised its profile as a startup hub.

After decades of economic development strategies that revolved around Downtown Brooklyn, the borough's business leaders believe its future growth lies in some of its farthest-flung locales—if the right strategic investments are made.

With a \$100,000 federal grant secured by the city's congressional delegation, the Brooklyn Alliance, an arm of the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce, will formulate a comprehensive development strategy. Chamber President Andrew Hoan said it would develop the road map with the help of a private consultant and local business groups, and use it to lobby all levels of government for funding.

In a shift from years past, Hoan said the strategy will look away developing housing and office space in the areas near the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges, and toward burgeoning neighborhoods including Sunset Park, East New York and Coney Island.

"What does Brooklyn look like in five years from now? What do the innovation firms that are growing here now need to continue to grow?" Hoan wondered in an interview. "The pipeline, I think, is solid now in Downtown Brooklyn. More interesting, I think, will be saying, 'What do we need in these areas that are just coming up?'"

The communities of Brooklyn's interior face their own changes and challenges.

In Sunset Park, a cluster of 16 waterfront warehouses known as Industry City has promoted itself as a hub for tech startups and [advanced manufacturing](#), but urban design mistakes dating back decades isolate it from the rest of the city and the surrounding community. East New York, one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city, will serve as the

testing ground for Mayor Bill de Blasio's affordable housing plan thanks to a rezoning passed last year and an approaching wave of subsidized rental construction.

Coney Island has emerged from decades of decline, years of land use squabbles and Superstorm Sandy in 2012 with refurbished amusements, a new amphitheater inside the historic former Childs Restaurant building and a growing New York Aquarium adding year-round attractions. But it must deal with the threat of more big storms, and the feasibility of attracting a steady stream of tourists. An economic development plan for the future of the borough will have to incorporate all of these neighborhoods and their unique needs.

Sunset rises

The city already plans substantial investments to facilitate growth at Industry City, a privately operated campus. The Brooklyn-Queens Connector, a multibillion-dollar proposed streetcar that de Blasio hopes to have running sometime next decade, would link the complex to several other burgeoning areas in both boroughs. This year, the mayor announced plans to set up a "Made in NY campus" for clothing manufacturers nearby.

The development also sits near the 36th Street subway station, serviced by the D and N express trains and the R local. But cutting off Industry City and the rest of the Sunset Park and Red Hook waterfront, physically and psychologically, is the [hulking Gowanus Expressway trestle](#).

According to Andrew Kimball, the chief executive at Industry City and a veteran of the redevelopment of the Brooklyn Navy Yard, an expansion of bicycle lanes and the Citi Bike program to Sunset Park could mitigate this problem, providing a route and wheels for them to reach the waterfront. He recommended de Blasio's ferry system incorporate a pier near 36th Street, and that Gov. Andrew Cuomo and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority add new bus routes to the area.

"The development of additional commercial nodes that are based near growing residential communities, where more and more people can walk or take short subway rides or bike rides to work—that's the future of Brooklyn's economy," Kimball said. "Through additional strategic infrastructure investments and good planning, there could be an explosion of economic development in areas like Sunset Park."

Sunset Park, though gentrifying, remains a predominantly working-class Latino and Asian immigrant community. Kimball said Industry City has instituted several training and educational programs to enable local residents to qualify for and land jobs at the high-tech businesses it aims to attract.

But a comprehensive economic development strategy could coordinate the borough's high schools and colleges with the tech sector, providing skills and opportunities for young graduates.

"That's something that we need to emphasize in our education system going forward," Kimball said.

Coney's long ride

Transit is a primary concern for Coney Island, where multiple subway lines terminate more than an hour's sojourn from Midtown Manhattan. As the area has sought to promote itself as a year-round destination for tourists—and not just a summer stop for locals—it has lamented the lack of access from the city's core.

The mayor excluded Coney Island from his new ferry system, and the city's Economic Development Corp. determined in 2012 that setting up a boat launch in the area would require a \$20 million capital investment and a substantial per-ride subsidy. Still, stakeholders in the area argue the down payment would yield tremendous dividends.

"Not being in the current ferry system I think is a hindrance to growth for sure," said Alexandra Silversmith, executive director of the Alliance for Coney Island, which represents the large operators in the amusement district, as well as the New York Aquarium, the Brooklyn Cyclones baseball team and historic Gargiulo's Restaurant. "We're going to see an increasing number of tourists coming to Coney Island, as well as Brooklynites and New Yorkers coming to see all the new attractions that have opened here."

Silversmith also raised the specter of another "hundred-year storm" arriving early. Hurricane Sandy swamped Coney Island, causing millions of dollars in property damage to the newly renovated amusement district and devastating its residential western end, which has long suffered from endemic poverty. Much of the subsequent resiliency work has focused on preventing future flooding from Coney Island Creek, which borders the peninsula on the north.

But the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has decided to include the neighborhood in a study of the sand spits and marshlands surrounding Jamaica Bay, and may propose substantial infrastructure investments to shore up the region.

Silversmith asserted that making those investments would be crucial to future economic development.

Finally, she suggested revisiting the fraught topic of rezoning. The city controversially decided to shrink the People's Playground's famous amusement district, much of which had laid fallow for decades, to allow for commercial and residential development. But some empty lots remain, and Silversmith argued an economic development study could examine the need for a hotel or small shops in areas still zoned for rides and games.

"I think what would be the most helpful in the study is finding what the demand is," she said.

East of Eden

Generations of white flight, urban blight and systemic disinvestment left East New York with huge tracts of vacant land and countless disused commercial and manufacturing spaces. Incidentally, the resulting low-density profile made it a perfect nursery for de Blasio's housing ambitions. The mayor's rezoning plan for the area, the first of several envisioned for city neighborhoods, aims to add 6,000 units of housing to the long-neglected community.

While the initial round of construction will largely raise subsidized, low-income buildings, de Blasio's designs have East New York ultimately becoming a mixed-income community. This will be both a test and an opportunity for longtime residents and incoming interests, according to Bill Wilkins, economic development director of the Local Development Corp. of East New York.

"We're helping to solve the affordable housing crisis in New York City, but those who benefit should be those from within," Wilkins said. "It should be those individuals who have really endured the hard times and the lean times. That way, it becomes a win-win."

In Wilkins' view, the large population of unemployed residents represents a vast potential labor force for both the planned construction projects and for the shops and other businesses that follow. To develop that resource, he recommended any economic development plan involve vocational training initiatives and programs to connect locals with job openings. Further, the neighborhood has retained a number of industrial and manufacturing companies—Wilkins is also manager of the East Brooklyn Business Improvement District, which represents them—and with outreach and investment, they could play a key role in the area's revitalization.

"Engage these local stakeholders as early as possible, because that becomes transformative," he said. "And that, hopefully, at the end of the day, will help to stabilize and increase the area median income of East New York."

As with Sunset Park and Coney Island, infrastructure is also a concern. East New York has a massive transit hub in the Broadway Junction subway station, but Wilkins argued the platforms need substantial cosmetic improvements. Further, many of the neighborhood's streets and sidewalks are fractured badly and pocked with potholes, a problem that heavy residential construction will likely exacerbate.

Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, a Brooklyn resident and native who lobbied for the Economic Development Administration grant, argued that it would allow the borough to continue to flower, to the benefit of both longtime residents and emerging industries.

"This EDA grant will provide the Brooklyn Alliance with the resources it needs to create new jobs, attract new businesses and make key infrastructure upgrades throughout Brooklyn," he said in a statement. "I am confident that the Brooklyn Alliance's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy will provide the local workforce and business community with the skills and expertise needed to give them an edge and compete successfully on the global stage."