

Sunnyside Yard Master Plan | Steering Committee 03

PROJECT: Sunnyside Yard Master Plan
DATE: 28 January 2019
TIME: 9:30-11:30a
LOCATION: Museum of the Moving Image
36-01 35th Ave, Astoria, NY 11106

Opening

During the third meeting of the Sunnyside Yard Steering Committee, the Consultant Team shared an update on community engagement and the technical progress work explaining the “ingredients” going into the master plan and preliminary analysis on the constraints and opportunities regarding programming, structural and rail infrastructure, urban design, site access, and phasing. The presentation was followed by a group discussion.

James Patchett, President and CEO of NYC Economic Development Corporation and Peter Waldt, Senior Director, Commercial Planning & Development, Amtrak (standing in for co-chair Tony Coscia), opened the meeting and reiterated the long-term nature of any project at Sunnyside Yard. Both highlighted that the Steering Committee has a unique opportunity to put their collective stamp at this early stage of planning for the site. President Patchett briefly mentioned two pieces of news since the last meeting – the departure of co-chair Alicia Glen from her role as Deputy Mayor and the announcement of Amazon’s new headquarters in Long Island City – and reiterated that the City’s commitment and approach to the Sunnyside Yard Master Planning process has not changed in light of either of these recent developments.

Master Plan Update

James Johnson-Piatt, Principal and CEO of Urbane Development, gave a brief update on the stakeholder engagement effort including interviews, public meetings, and the previous Steering Committee meetings.

Vishaan Chakrabarti, Founder of Practice for Architecture and Urbanism and lead of the Consultant Team, started the master plan update with a summary of key topics that have been brought up during the 60+ interviews completed to date, the 1st public meeting, and the activity at the last Steering Committee meeting:

- Infrastructure/Transportation
- Parks/Open Space
- Jobs/Office Space/Industrial space
- Schools (K-12, vocational, higher education)
- Housing (affordable, for seniors, for young workforce)
- Medical facilities and community services
- Local Retail (Mom & Pop, Grocery Stores, Neighborhood retail)
- Arts & Cultural
- Community Spaces
- Industrial/Advanced Manufacturing
- Social Services and Neighborhood Services (Police, Fire, municipal services, etc.)

As part of the master planning process the team has been studying a variety of different hypothetical program combinations. The team has been especially testing how housing, office space, cultural space and other jobs-focused uses, and institutional uses uniquely affect and respond to transportation, market forces, and financing. The team is analyzing many different possible combinations of these and other program types to create a successful balance between mix of uses, open space, location of different levels of density on the site, and project financing.

Given the large scale and multi-decade nature of a project at Sunnyside Yard, the final master plan for the Yard will have a mix of many program types.

Chakrabarti outlined key constraints and opportunities on the site the team is analyzing. He explained the challenges of designing solutions to navigating significant grade changes between an overbuild deck and the surrounding streets, especially along the northern edge of the site. He discussed the existing rail conditions and the ongoing process to design an overbuild deck that can support new development above while accommodating the needs of the rail activities below, highlighting many complex considerations. Chakrabarti also noted that the team is studying ways in which the thickness of the overbuild deck can be used for creative purposes to improve day-to-day quality of life and sustainability, such as water reuse, waste systems, and shipping distribution.

Chakrabarti then shared planning concepts the team is developing for the site. He presented studies of block sizes, street grid configurations in relation to the existing surrounding street grids, and strategies to integrate different types of parks and open spaces. The team is studying how to integrate rail operations and facilities below, within, and above the deck, recognizing potential opportunities for Amtrak to locate buildings above the deck at street level as part of a project. The team is also analyzing transit capacity, solar orientation, and the context of the surrounding neighborhoods to inform appropriate building typologies at different parts of the site. In particular, the team is analyzing how mid-rise construction could deliver the same density as high-rise towers in some parts of the Yard.

Chakrabarti then discussed preliminary ideas about phasing options on the site. The team has been looking at phasing preferences from the perspectives of many disciplines, especially urban design, planning for subway capacity, rail, structural, and geotechnical engineering, and market analysis. The analysis does not immediately suggest a first phase location that is ideal from the perspective of each discipline, and the team will be rigorously analyzing potential phasing scenarios in the coming months in consultation with the Steering Committee.

Some of the key questions driving this scenario testing are:

- How do we define the boundaries of each phase?
- How big should each phase be?
- What impacts will the location of phasing have on existing transportation modes and infrastructure?
- How will track level operations affect phasing above the deck?
- Could market forces indicate the best location for a phase one?
- How do the surrounding neighborhoods affect how we think about phasing?

The team will share progress work of a draft master plan for the site and further analysis on phasing options in the next Steering Committee meeting on April 1st.

Group Discussion

During the group discussion Steering Committee members both responded to the material presented and provided recommendations for efforts moving forward. Below is a summary of the key issues discussed.

Urban Design/Open Space

- A Steering Committee member stressed that it is important to acknowledge existing shortage of open space and explain the open space ratios the team is proposing for the master plan.
- A Steering Committee member requested the team ensure that the corridor being considered along the northern edge is treated as a point of transition and not a barrier between the overbuild project and the existing community.

- A Steering Committee member requested the team make sure to investigate how to improve connections between the north and the south parts of the site, and not only focus on connecting east and west.
 - Chakrabarti responded that due to the grade changes and clearance requirements it will be very challenging to add vehicular connections from the north and south, but the team is exploring creative approaches to pedestrian connections.
- A Steering Committee member expressed that towers along Northern Boulevard would be a major concern for the local community. The team should study the effects of high-rise building typologies in that area of the site.
 - In response to questions about location of height and density, Chakrabarti clarified that building height is not equivalent to density. Parts of the site can have mid-rise structures with the same density as high-rise towers. The final master plan will have a range of densities and building types.
- A Steering Committee member asked the team to investigate creative sustainability solutions and approaches to power generation such as co-gen and solar.
- A Steering Committee member asked for precedents of systems that would allow for the deck to be utilized for infrastructure.
 - Chakrabarti cited Roosevelt Island, Disneyland, and the Gothic District in Barcelona. This strategy would not necessarily add anything to the deck, as it could fit within the required structural thickness.

Sunnyside Station

- A Steering Committee member expressed that the Sunnyside Station in the East Side Access project is a vital component of a Sunnyside Yard overbuild project.
- A representative from MTA clarified that construction of East Side Access is separate from construction of Sunnyside Station as East Side Access' tunnels to GCT are to the north of any future location of Sunnyside Station. In addition, planning for any future Sunnyside Station needs to take ridership into account, impacts to LIRR service and operations, and constructability given proximity of Harold Interlocking.
- Chakrabarti mentioned that more detailed work on how a potential Sunnyside Station would fit within an overbuild project would begin in the coming months.

Rail & Transportation

- A Steering Committee member acknowledged preference to utilize existing capacity on the M and R as well as favoring commercial and institutional uses.
- A Steering Committee member asked if it was possible to bury the rail infrastructure to reduce the height required by the deck and asked if there had been a cost estimate for this strategy.
 - Amtrak responded that there is concern regarding flooding vulnerability.

Stakeholder Engagement

- In public meetings/outreach efforts, a Steering Committee member requested a “do nothing” approach be offered as an option going forward.
- The Steering Committee requested the creation of a physical model to help people understand the site better.

Next Steps

The next Steering Committee Meeting will take place on April 1st. During this meeting the group will review a draft comprehensive master plan that incorporates your feedback and inputs from the public meeting and stakeholder interviews.

The next public meeting will take place in Astoria on March 26th.

Summary of discussion on optional follow-up call on Wednesday, February 6

- A Steering Committee member reinforced the importance of Sunnyside Station as part of a project at Sunnyside Yard.
- A Steering Committee member mentioned that there were challenges in the first public meeting, particularly the long line and the size of the venue. The team clarified that future public meetings would be in different locations with different structures to accommodate a range of environments for large crowds, education and feedback.
- A Steering Committee member asked if the dead-end streets in Dutch Kills would be converted into vehicular connections, particularly one that is currently being planned as open space.
- A Steering Committee member asked a clarifying question on the water table and the level of Amtrak's tracks. Chakrabarti responded that due to the water table and post-Sandy flood risk there are challenges to lowering the tracks. Work is happening on how to manage draining and flooding both below the deck and within/above the deck as part of an overbuild.
- A Steering Committee member stressed that there is a lot of interest in advancing environmental sustainability opportunities as part of the master plan. Chakrabarti noted that the team will share further work on this in the next Steering Committee meeting as well as the third public meeting.