

Sunnyside Yard Master Plan | Steering Committee 05

PROJECT: Sunnyside Yard Master Plan
DATE: 13 June 2019
TIME: 11:00a – 1:00p
LOCATION: Long Island City YMCA
32-23 Queens Blvd, LIC, NY

Opening

During the fifth meeting of the Sunnyside Yard Steering Committee, the Consultant Team shared an update on community engagement and a draft of the comprehensive planning analysis for Sunnyside Yard that incorporates feedback from stakeholders and the technical work of the Consultant team. The Team discussed preliminary findings of the financial analysis in the second half of the meeting.

James Patchett, President and CEO of NYCEDC opened the conversation by thanking local elected officials for attending and the Steering Committee members, recognizing those who attended the four public workshops in April and May. Following a brief welcome from Sharon Greenberger and Meishay Gattis, our hosts from Long Island City YMCA, Patchett noted that this would be Cali Williams' final meeting as Director of Sunnyside Yards and that Adam Meagher would step into the role. Co-chairs Sharon Greenberger and Liz Luskin welcomed new Steering Committee members - Annie Cotton Morris, Chair of NYCHA, Citywide Council of Presidents, and President of the Woodside Tenants Association and Tomoko Kawamoto, Director of Public Information at the Museum of the Moving Image.

Greenberger gave a brief overview of the four public workshops that had occurred since the previous Steering Committee meeting, noting that each workshop focused on a different topic of particular interest to the community - Urban Design, Open Space, Sustainability, and Transportation. Greenberger also noted the success of community tabling events in reaching new people and raising awareness of the master planning process. To date, outreach had been conducted at CEC 30's Family Day, LIC Springs, the Queens Pride Parade, Taste of Sunnyside, and most recently at Taste of LIC. Over the summer, the team will table at the Razi School, local NYCHA Family Days, and at the Queens Library branches.

James Johnson-Piatt of Urbane Development gave a brief update on the Stakeholder Engagement efforts since the last Steering Committee meeting and summarized key findings to date from on community priorities:

- Urban design: Green cover, contextual density, human scale
- Programming: Incubation spaces, family & senior housing, diverse economic activity
- Sustainability: Storm water mitigation, waste reduction, climate preparedness
- Mobility: Complete streets, multi-modal hub, interborough connections
- Connections to the deck/Yard: activated, visible & inviting, utilize public buildings
- Open space: Centrally accessible open space, public squares for arts/culture, sports & recreation accessible to local schools
- Affordability/financing: Comprehensive policy tools, creative approaches to deep affordability, affordable commercial and industrial spaces

Master Plan Update

Vishaan Chakrabarti, lead of the consultant team, shared an update of the planning analysis to date, which included an update on the various interrelated layers of analysis influencing the plan:

- Area of the Yard most feasible for decking
- Deck height analysis, highlighting how master planning analysis and ongoing conversations with Amtrak and MTA engineers have resulted in lower rail clearances and a smoother, more seamless transition between the deck and surrounding roads and bridges
- Strategy for a road and grid network in the Yard, highlighting a Northern and Southern Corridor, interior street network, and connecting linear greenway
- Strategies for how existing program in adjacent neighborhoods influences the location of potential programs on the Yard, including:
 - Open space
 - Institutional and social infrastructure
 - Industrial
 - Commercial + “Commdustrial,” or an emerging typology blending commercial and industrial
 - Residential

The discussion went into greater depth about how the proposed open space network and range of building typologies contemplated were shaped by feedback from the Steering Committee and public engagement process, as well as an update of how the team is beginning to evaluate potential phasing. The phasing is being studied relative to rail operations, market, and planning factors. An initial proposal for evaluation criteria outlines variables critical to (1) success as a stand-alone project, (2) rail entity priorities, (3) policy and stakeholder priorities, and (4) financial realities.

Key comments and questions from Steering Committee members in response to this topic included:

- A Steering Committee member asked about the difference between Hudson Yards and Sunnyside Yard with regards to programming and project approach
 - This part of the discussion focused on how Sunnyside Yard and Hudson Yards have very different contexts and histories. Both feedback heard from the public and the Steering Committee members as well as the team’s technical analysis reinforces that at Sunnyside Yard the surrounding neighborhood context, demographics, market conditions, planning needs, history, site topography, and rail activities and requirements are very different from Hudson Yards.
- A Steering Committee member noted that transportation is a very important part of this plan – both in terms of transit to the site and the transportation strategy on the deck.
 - A potential future Sunnyside Station as a central “civic hub” for the area could be designed to support a variety of transportation modes
 - Land use strategy is relevant because mixed use neighborhoods can reduce pressure on the transit system by allowing more people to walk to work

- Near-term transit capacity is an important consideration for early phase development
- A Steering Committee member expressed that affordable housing is not the top priority in all conversations, and that sustainability is a more pressing issue
 - There was an active discussion about the benefits of urban density compared to sprawl in the context of sustainability impacts -providing housing near areas of work with access to mass transit can greatly reduce energy expenditure.
 - The analysis is also exploring different technologies and tactics to incorporate greater sustainability at this stage in the planning process to explore storm water mitigation, waste reduction, and climate preparedness.
- There was a question about how the central greenway strategy proposed meets existing needs to provide adequate green space
 - There was a discussion about why there is an analysis of a larger open space to be near existing housing stock in order to serve surrounding communities
 - The greenway is intended to metaphorically and literally connect neighborhoods adjacent to and throughout the Yard and not necessarily designed with the intention of attracting visitors as a destination.
- A Steering Committee member inquired how the required deck design varies for larger buildings versus open space.
 - Deck design requirements for open space is comparable to the deck design requirements for roughly a six to seven story building.
- A Steering Committee member expressed concerns that investing in making Sunnyside Yard more usable or desirable may lead to adverse affordability impacts in surrounding communities.
 - There was a lively discussion among the members of the Steering Committee with the City, consultant team, and elected representatives about the public policies that could be part of a solution. It was noted that while this is outside of the scope of the planning analysis for Sunnyside Yard specifically, there may be an opportunity to leverage the process to explore new policies. This question hinges on broader policy tools, including policies such as the recent rent reforms and minimum wage announced at the City and State level, as well as new policy reforms that have been discussed like tax reform. In the face of these pressures it is even more critical plan thoughtfully for future growth.
 - Sunnyside Yard will be a generational, long-term effort. This planning process has been framing the analysis from the perspective of improving quality of life for the surrounding neighborhoods, while ensuring it's placed regionally as a hub at the center of New York City for many decades.

Following the discussion there was an update on the financial analysis with Kei Hayashi, the lead on the finance work for the consultant team. The finance team discussed four case studies of other large-scale projects and how they were financed over time: Hudson Yards, Battery Park City, Queens West, and Co-op City.

The team explained the costing methodology, initial costing exercise, and relative value of program types on terra firma and deck. The team found development in the current market – which is quite different from the case studies discussed – to be challenging due

to high deck costs. The Committee engaged in a lively discussion, which included the following questions and comments:

- A Steering Committee member noted the long timespan of a project like Sunnyside Yard could see large shifts in the market, potentially changing the financial model significantly.
- A Steering Committee member asked for clarifications about the assumptions in the model.
 - The assumptions in the model regarding developer profit and that the analysis looks at all potential value created and what is left to pay for public goods as part of the exercise. This does not yet account for additional income, corporate taxes, and broader economic impacts of development.
 - The team will continue to explore potential cost-savings in further analysis.

The next steps for the finance team are to test different programs for cost and benefit, identify the threshold for potential public investments, and identify near and long-term phasing to determine the potentially appropriate balance of cost and benefit.

Next Steps

The next Steering Committee Meeting will take place in late September. During this meeting the group will review a revised update of the draft analysis that incorporates feedback from this discussion.