

Sunnyside Yard Master Plan | Steering Committee 05

PROJECT: Sunnyside Yard Master Plan
DATE: 2 October 2019
TIME: 10:00am – 12:00pm
LOCATION: CUNY School of Law
2 Court Square West, Long Island City, New York

Opening

The sixth meeting of the Sunnyside Yard Steering Committee focused on discussing in-depth an updated draft of the comprehensive master plan for Sunnyside Yard that incorporates further stakeholder feedback and technical analysis.

Vicki Been, Deputy Mayor for Housing and Economic Development, opened the conversation by thanking local elected officials, Steering Committee members, as well as CUNY School of Law for hosting the meeting. Been underscored that the planning process for Sunnyside Yard is a key priority for the Mayor as its central location within the region, size, public ownership, and strong surrounding neighborhoods make it an important asset for the future of Western Queens and the City. Been emphasized the importance of comprehensive long-term planning for our neighborhoods and stressed our responsibility to proactively plan for the future at this unique moment in time with the railroads.

Jeff Gerlach, Director of Infrastructure Planning at Amtrak, spoke on behalf of Amtrak, noting that planning for the future of Sunnyside Yard is critical to Amtrak and that they are committed to working closely with state and local partners through the planning process. A last-minute conflict prevented Chairman Coscia from attending in person, but Gerlach noted that Chairman Coscia had met with Deputy Mayor Been to ensure collaboration for how the master plan can help solidify a long-term partnership on the site.

Steering Committee Co-Chair Elizabeth Lusskin, President of Long Island City Partnership, followed Gerlach and previewed the agenda for the meeting, which would be structured differently from previous meetings in direct response to feedback received from the Committee. This meeting would be structured as a brief presentation with significant time for open discussion of the draft plan.

Master Plan Update

Adam Meagher, Director of Sunnyside Yard, NYCEDC, noted that NYCEDC will also be offering office hours for Steering Committee members as additional opportunities to discuss the plan in more detail. Meagher and Vishaan Chakrabarti, founder of Practice for Architecture and Urbanism and lead of the Consultant Team, led the presentation, framed around six key topics heard over the course of the planning process:

- Open Space and Social Infrastructure
- Housing
- Workforce & Jobs
- Transportation
- Resiliency and Sustainability
- “Keeping it Queens” (designing the plan to integrate with the surrounding neighborhoods)

The presentation was followed by open discussion, with nearly all Steering Committee members sharing thoughts and asking questions. Key comments included:

- A Steering Committee member praised the plan for **addressing a wide range of needs and concerns raised by a broad group of people**
- A Steering Committee member expressed they were pleased to see the proposed regional rail station in the plan
- A Steering Committee member reinforced the importance of workforce development opportunities and ensuring that future construction jobs were embedded within the communities
- A Steering Committee member asked if the **housing** units proposed in the draft plan were enough, noting that the current program equates to less than 3,000 a decade – they questioned if this was a missed opportunity, especially considering the housing shortage the city is facing
 - Meagher and Chakrabarti explained that the housing density and typologies in the draft plan are aiming to balance the need to address the city's housing shortage while also being responsive to community feedback that building heights should feel like an extension of existing communities and be a mix of densities.
- A Steering Committee member noted that there is a need for **shared public amenities** rather than amenities built into buildings

A Steering Committee asked if **parking** was accommodated in the plan

- Patchett responded that the plan is designed to be flexible to respond to the needs on a phase by phase basis and will need to be detailed to meet the requirements at the time a particular portion of the plan is constructed, however the master plan takes a long-term and ambitious approach to planning and aspires to provide enough sustainable, desirable transportation options in the future that private vehicle ownership will not be needed
- A Steering Committee member raised concerns about **flooding on Amtrak/MTA tracks**
 - Meagher and Chakrabarti explained that the railyard itself is predominantly out of the flood plain, and that building on a deck would help capture rainwater and other runoff in new green infrastructure within and above the deck, helping to manage the conditions in the railyard below
- A Steering Committee member asked about **costing and financing** of the plan and if modifications to parts of the plan could be made so it doesn't require public investment
 - James Patchett, President of NYCEDC, noted that the approach for this project was a different approach than have been taken on other projects, where the process starting from a place of understanding the needs of the community and creating a plan worth doing rather than optimizing for financial returns, and the draft plan today requires public investment to realize over many decades
- A Steering Committee member asked about **phasing** and if there were parts of the project that could go quicker and if the whole deck needed to be built at once.
 - Meagher and Chakrabarti explained that there are areas that are easier to build over based on the rail conditions below. They clarified that the whole deck does not need to be built at once, and the plan is designed in a way that the phasing is flexible. Future decisions about phasing must also consider investments in infrastructure and existing capacity

- A Steering Committee member asked who would be **accountable for decisions** made after the current administration leaves and stressed the importance of involving people who will be impacted in the future
 - Lusskin noted that these critical questions of long-term governance will be discussed at the next meeting
 - Meagher said that at a minimum, there will need to be a process cemented with Amtrak to ensure work done in the Yard would not preclude an overbuild
 - Been noted that even if a phase of the master plan does not go forward in the near-term, the process has allowed us to plan for the future in a different way-by first understanding what is needed and creating a plan worth doing

Next Steps

During the next Steering Committee Meeting, the group will review updates to the draft plan and discuss governance options for moving the plan forward.