

Engineers: Leave the City's Bridge Planning To Us

by Brooklyn Eagle (edit@brooklyneagle.net), published online 08-07-2007

Brooklyn Official: Don't Put 'My Cousin Vinny' in Charge

By Evan Barton

Brooklyn Daily Eagle

BROOKLYN — In response to two recent disasters — the collapse of the 1-35W Mississippi River Bridge in Minneapolis and the Midtown steam pipe explosion here in New York — the American Engineering Alliance (AEA) and Professional Engineers (PE) held a press conference at the Manhattan foot of the Brooklyn Bridge.

In particular, they discussed the need for greater protection of city infrastructure.

The engineers criticized the Bloomberg administration for giving non-engineers and non-architects oversight over technical projects. They advocated more oversight by engineers and other technical professionals in government projects, and recommended a new position — deputy mayor of infrastructure management.

“We’re trying to get our elected officials to pay attention to the seriousness of this problem,” said Salvatore Galletta, chair of Professional Engineers. “Elected officials are making decisions that they aren’t necessarily qualified to make.”

State Sen. Eric Adams, D-Central Brooklyn/Park Slope, spoke in support of placing more engineers in government. “What informs your decisions, if you’re not technically informed to make decisions?” he said.

“You cannot put my cousin Vinny in charge” of maintaining and updating city and state bridges, pipes, and other infrastructure systems, he said.

Councilman Alan Gerson, whose district encompasses the Manhattan sides of the Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Williamsburg Bridges, mentioned that New York’s infrastructure is more than a century old in many places. He suggested that technical oversight would be important in maintaining the system’s sustainability.

“There’s no question that this city has one of the most complicated systems of any city in the world,” he said, adding, “What has barely worked — and sometimes not worked — so far, cannot go forward.”

‘Bad Economic Decisions’

They generally advocated for a proactive approach to addressing the city’s aging infrastructure, practicing preventive measures to prevent future loss of life. Galletta suggested that engineers have a moral and legal responsibility to ensure the safety of the public, and placing non-engineer managers over government projects and fund allocation is inefficient and potentially dangerous.

“At the very least, you get bad economic decisions,” he said, as well as investment in the wrong projects.

Both Galletta and Adams mentioned a “dumbing down” in many of the city’s appointed officials, which Adams suggested is dangerous in the long run. “We can’t come back later and make retrospective repairs,” he said, giving further support to the preventive approach.

According to a press liaison at the Department of Transportation (DOT), however, groups like AEA and PE primarily want more jobs for engineers.

In a prepared statement, “There is no basis to the logic that the immediate supervisor of a licensed professional engineer must also be a licensed professional engineer. Under that logic, the mayor would be required to be a licensed professional engineer, attorney, teacher, certified public accountant, actuary, etc.”

The Department of Transportation has a Bridge Repair and Preventative Maintenance unit that employs 34 people with engineering titles, as well as an additional 264 tradespeople and support staff. The executive director, Dorothy Roses, is responsible for the allocation of federal funds for preventative maintenance, taking these funds and transferring them into productive use.

Every engineer in this section reports to one of two professional engineers (George Klein or Mohammad Sharif), and if the immediate supervisor of an engineer in this section is not an engineer, then he or she cannot overrule an engineer on engineering matters.

‘Je Ne Sais Pas’

Several people crossing the bridge Monday afternoon said they would continue to do so. Two French visitors crossing the bridge said, “Je ne sais pas. Who knows what will happen?” They suggested that crossing the bridge and seeing the view of the city was worth the risk.

Another walker stated, “I’ve been walking across this bridge for 17 years, and I think it’s pretty safe.”

http://www.brooklynagle.com/categories/category.php?category_id=27&id=14658

Conference Examines Danger of Sub-Prime Loans Leading to Foreclosure by Brooklyn Eagle (edit@brooklyneagle.net), published online 07-11-2007

Lenders Make Money by Auctioning Off Homes

By Evan Barton

Brooklyn Daily Eagle

BEDFORD-STUYVESANT — The New York State Senate Democratic Conference held a public hearing at Restoration Plaza yesterday to discuss abusive and unfair lending practices in New York.

“We could have held this hearing anywhere,” said State Senator Velmanette Montgomery, D-Brooklyn. “But we chose to come here because this is where the issue is.”

State Sens. Marty Connor, Manhattan/Brooklyn, and Jeffrey Klein, Bronx, also spoke at the event.

Susan Ludwig, co-director of the Neighborhood Economic Development Advocacy Project (NEDAP), mentioned that in the past, her organization focused primarily on refinancing schemes where elderly homeowners often lost their homes after refinancing at an adjustable rate, after which the lenders foreclosed on their homes.

“The nature of the problem has changed,” she said. While there were once a handful of companies to point the finger at — Delta Funding the frontrunner among them — now most banks offer sub-prime loans.

These loans are intended for people who do not qualify for market interest rates due to credit history or a lack of finances. Sub-prime rates are usually set higher than those of prime loans to offset lending to at-risk borrowers; and unlike prime loans, sub-prime loans can adjust without adhering to the market.

African-Americans and Latinos are both about four times more likely to receive a sub-prime loan. Since these loans have a significantly higher rate of foreclosure, many of the speakers and the audience members at the hearing felt that these loans are predatory in nature.

NEDAP predicts that, by the end of 2007, at least 15,000 foreclosure actions will be filed in New York City. According to the New York State Banking Department, foreclosures have increased by 40 percent since 2005, a rate that closely matches the 42 percent increase in foreclosures nationwide.

While some lenders have lost money through sub-prime lending, others have made a significant amount of money through issuing loans at rates that increase over time, eventually making it impossible for the borrower to pay. The lender then makes a profit off the foreclosure and auctioning off of the home.

Loan flipping, or the selling of mortgages from one bank to another, has also led to sizable profits on Wall Street, where investment firms buy the mortgage loans in bulk and turn them into securities.

Klein suggested that it is important to educate the public about the risks involved in sub-prime loans. He also said legislation should be passed to address the foreclosure problem in the state, including a six-month moratorium on foreclosures, as well as laws that prevent flipping mortgage loans.

http://www.brooklyneagle.com/categories/category.php?category_id=27&id=1399

1

Officials, Area Residents Seek To Preserve Food Fair in Red Hook

by Brooklyn Eagle (edit@brooklyneagle.net), published online 06-14-2007

Latin-American Food Draws Visitors from All Over B'klyn

By Evan Barton

Brooklyn Daily Eagle

RED HOOK — While block parties, fairs, and softball games are typical of Red Hook and other Brooklyn neighborhoods in the spring and summer months, the weekend food fair in Red Hook Park is among the few summer attractions that bring families and foodies alike from not only Red Hook, but all over the city.

The vendors are known for serving authentic Latin-American food from Mexico, Central and South America and the Caribbean. Now, however, the Food Vendors Committee of Red Hook Park, led by executive director Cesar Fuentes, feels that the future of the event has been called into question due to the Parks Department's recent rejection of their application to renew their temporary-use license. Though the Parks Department will allow them to use their current license through Labor Day, they will have to submit another application bid to use the park after that.

Sen. Charles Schumer last Saturday met at the park with Fuentes and the other vendors to express his disappointment with the department's decision to force the vendors to re-bid for their permits to sell food at the park.

"These vendors are a Brooklyn treasure, and they should be celebrated and supported, not be subject to the city's bottom line," Schumer said at the event last Saturday.

"The transformation that they have effected in this community can't be viewed solely through dollars and cents. The diverse, cultural vitality they bring to Red Hook is what makes New York the great city it is, and it should be preserved in the face of a minor profit."

The Food Vendors Committee currently has a budget of \$30,000, about \$10,000 of which goes to the Parks Department, with the rest going toward park maintenance and improvements. Many supporters of the food fair worry that the department will increase the cost of the license by opening it to bidding. Anything higher than \$50,000, they say, would eliminate the members of the Food Vendors Committee from the bid, and corporate interests would certainly be able to out-bid them.

Though there have been vendors in Red Hook Park for at least 30 years, the current food fair, which includes 13 vendors, began as part of the overall effort to revitalize

the park and increase its use in the summer. Throughout most of the 1980s and early '90s, Red Hook Park was often inundated with drugs and gang warfare, and in December 1992, Principal Patrick Daly of P.S. 15 was accidentally shot in a crossfire while looking for a student absent from school.

By the mid-1990s, however, the city, along with the community, began investing in revitalizing the park. Residents of the neighborhood began meeting there to both watch and participate in soccer games. In the nascent years of these events, families brought food for themselves and their friends to enjoy while watching the games.

The people bringing the food later organized the Food Vendors Committee and began selling food to people coming to watch the games. Enthusiasts of authentic Latin-American food were attracted to the fair as well as the soccer games, making the event into what it is today.

Schumer suggested that it might be somewhat disrespectful to the achievements of the neighborhood's residents if the Parks Department forced them out of the park.

"I knew Red Hook in the bad old days, just 15 years ago, when Principal Daly was killed and these fields were so pock-marked and strewn with debris that weekend soccer games would have been unimaginable," Schumer said.

"Now, with city investment in the grounds and the immigrant imagination, the Red Hook ball fields are a vibrant culinary and recreational landmark that has received the national attention it deserves. It would be a travesty to dispose of it."

A representative for Councilwoman Sara Gonzalez, who represents this district, also expressed concern for the food vendors' future, saying, "The fair offered by the Red Hook Food Vendors represents really important cultural diversity. It is not only appreciated by the locals but it actually draws people to the park. It doesn't make sense to destroy what has become tradition, in the name of a few more bucks."

Phil Abramson, a representative from the Parks Department, said that the current license the Food Vendors Committee is using is not the correct type of permit for the type of event they are running at the park.

"According to concessions regulations, they need to have a vending license, which is done through the bidding process," he said. "Our intention is not to push out the vendors, who we appreciate and want to keep, but to comply with concession regulations."

http://www.brooklyneagle.com/categories/category.php?category_id=27&id=13444

