

Go Team!

by Dan Jacoby

Last spring, the mayor and governor attended the big unveiling to announce formally that they wanted to build a football stadium.

Actually, the full plan expands the nearby convention center, builds a football stadium, rezones many city blocks, extends a subway line a tiny bit, and generally wreaks havoc on the west side of Manhattan.

Expanding the Jacob Javits convention center is an excellent idea; this is by far the largest city in the country, but it has only the 18th largest convention center. Building a football stadium is also a good idea; it will bring the New York Jets back to New York, be available for concerts, trade shows, etc., and might be the Olympic stadium in 2012. Extending the #7 subway line is also a good idea; bringing mass transit to more areas of the city will reap huge rewards.

The problem is, the actual plans fall far short of the good ideas.

The main problem is that putting a football stadium over the Hudson rail yards is a mistake. Primarily, at that location there is no way 75,000 people can arrive and leave in any kind of reasonable time period. Currently, there is no mass transit, and even if the subway extension gets finished on time (and who wants to bet on that) it won't be nearly enough to handle the load. There are also ideas for a commuter rail platform, but at the moment they are just ideas. There aren't enough roads for people who want to drive, and there's no place to park once they get there. In short, the current infrastructure simply doesn't exist, and there's just not enough room to build the infrastructure necessary to support a stadium.

Additionally, the stadium will only be fully utilized a few days a year. Despite the rosy claims, experience with other stadiums shows that for over 300 days every year the monstrosity is going to be mostly or completely dark, casting an evening shadow over the west side. It is, quite simply, a waste of valuable space. This waterfront location has the potential, if properly developed, to be highly desirable commercial and residential real estate. It would bring in far more jobs, far more people, and far more tax revenue for the city than any stadium could hope to provide.

Moreover, the parking problem will seriously hurt the theater industry, which also brings far more money – and jobs – into the city than the stadium.

The west side stadium plan should be scrapped.

“Okay,” some of you say, “you’ve shot off your big mouth, but do you have a better idea?”

Actually, I do.

Build the stadium over the Sunnyside rail yards in Queens.

Putting a deck over the Sunnyside rail yards in order to build the stadium might initially cost quite a bit more than decking over the Hudson rail yards (which were originally built with this idea in mind). But the advantages more than make up for the initial cost:

- There are already four subway lines that service that area (E, R, N, 7). Additionally, the rail lines that already exist could be used to bring in Metro North, LIRR and NJ Transit trains right to the stadium. In theory, everyone could arrive by rail. Even Amtrak could have a station.
- For those who feel they just have to drive, there's also plenty of room for parking garages – and they won't have to pay the 10% garage tax in Manhattan.
- For the Olympics, putting the stadium in Sunnyside brings it closer to the proposed location for the Olympic village. It would be easier to get the athletes to the stadium. Security would also be easier, because instead of having to go through a tunnel, over a bridge, or slowly across the river, where terrorists could camp out, officials have a choice of many roads, and terrorists won't know where to be ready. Additionally, by not being on the water, the threat of attacks by boat is also practically eliminated.
- Decentralization projects such as this mean more room for jobs and housing in the city. Shoving everything into Manhattan fails to take advantage of what New York City has to offer.
- Much of the proposed west side rezoning wouldn't be needed, and thousands of people can keep their homes and their jobs.
- The Hudson rail yards could still be developed into high-priced commercial and residential real estate, creating thousands of new jobs and hundreds of new homes.
- Putting the stadium in Queens could mean involving the New York Mets, who have wanted a new stadium for years. By bringing the Mets in on the plan as well, the additional costs could be paid for. Furthermore, the current Flushing site of Shea Stadium could be developed, creating more jobs, more homes and more revenues for the city.
- Finally, the Sunnyside yards offer easy access to bring in building materials and plenty of room to store them for short periods. Building could go much faster, defraying much of the cost.

Overall, the many advantages of building the stadium in Queens far outweigh the one initial disadvantage. Additionally, with proper turnkey partners, full commercial development of the west side could mean far more than a small extension of the #7 subway line.

Under the current plan, the #7 line would merely be extended to the Javits center. And it would cost a fortune. If the Hudson rail yards were made available to private developers, the #7 could be extended even farther down the west side to include stops at Chelsea Piers and the rapidly growing meat market – and then swing around and hook up with the L subway line. In addition to providing service to these burgeoning areas, this expansion would replace two stub ends, smoothing the flow during rush hours and reducing delays.

This is a far more ambitious plan, and ordinarily it would be far more expensive, and therefore far less politically enticing. But with the promise of tremendous west side and Flushing development, corporate partners could be found not only to defray the cost, but also to do the work faster. A typical example of how well this type of public/private cooperative project can work is the Citicorp center in Long Island City.

This cooperative effort would make sure that the job was finished on time. It would also make more money available for other mass transit projects, such as the LIRR extension into Grand Central Station and completion of the Second Avenue subway line. Additionally, this plan would strengthen our Olympic bid. Businesses win, New Yorkers win, the city wins, the fans win, the taxpayers win – in short, everybody wins.

Now, if we can only find some way for the Mets to win.

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