



BEYOND THE BOOM

AN ONGOING SERIES ABOUT THE CHALLENGES
JERSEY CITY WILL FACE AS IT MOVES BEYOND
THE CONSTRUCTION BOOM

PHOTOS: SANDRA SWIEDER PHOTOGRAPHY

CAN
PRESERVATION
AND PROGRESS
COEXIST?



HUNDREDS TURNED OUT AT A MEETING ABOUT THE SIXTH STREET EMBANKMENT.
PHOTO: RICHARD J. MCCORMACK

What does it take to lure open-space advocates inside on a sunny Saturday in October? How about a celebration of open space? Hundreds filled the Resurrection School gym on Brunswick Street—all for the sake of a stone wall. But not any stone wall. This one has a history as tangled as its name—the Pennsylvania Railroad Harsimus Stem Embankment. Also known as the Sixth Street Embankment, it comprises a series of sandstone and granite blocks spanning Sixth Street from Marin Boulevard to Brunswick Street. A section of the Pennsylvania Railroad

THE SIXTH STREET EMBANKMENT IS THE QUINTESSENTIAL JERSEY CITY PARKS PROJECT

freight line traversed the area from 1902 until the late 1970s. For the past 10 years, the Sixth Street Embankment Coalition has labored to save the embankment from development and in recent years has worked to turn the top of the embankment into a park and nature trail that would link to a 2,500-mile series of trails stretching from Maine to Florida. The current plan includes a light rail route from Jersey City to Secaucus—a component that the coalition ini-

tially opposed but later learned to live with, given that the tracks account for only a quarter of the 100-foot area.

Not surprisingly, that's not where the story ends. The Sixth Street Embankment is the quintessential Jersey City parks project, with the forces of preservation and progress going head to head amid the city's ongoing quest for open space.

IN A NUTSHELL: NEW YORK property owner Steve Hyman and his partners bought the embankment from Conrail, the railroad company, with an eye toward demolishing it and building 64 two-family homes. He later floated plans for 1,500 units that would be integrated with the park, nature trail, and light rail. But the embankment coalition and other open-space advocates take issue with the quantity and height of the buildings, charging that they would damage the embankment structure, as well as its historic-landmark status.

The plan is entangled in red tape. Under federal law, rail carriers intending to abandon any part of their railroad lines must first file an application with the Surface Transportation Board (STB), the federal agency that regulates interstate railroad transportation. If the STB finds an abandoned railroad property suitable for public use, then the property must be offered for sale for that purpose, not sold to a private buyer like Hyman.

Community members signed a petition and sent it to the STB stating that Conrail should have gotten authorization from the STB to abandon the embankment before it was sold to Hyman. The October event at the Resurrection School was held to celebrate the STB's ruling in favor of the petition. At press time, ownership of the embankment was still in question.

NEWCOMERS WERE THERE IN force, joining longtime residents to help preserve as much open space as possible in a city bulging at the seams with new development and new urban dwellers. Jersey City's current population of 240,000 is expected to reach 270,000 by the 2010 census. The larger the population, the more the need for parks. And young families bring kids and pets—prime users of open space.

Jennifer Meyer, president of the embankment coalition, moved to Jersey City from Manhattan in 1996, where she lived in an apartment near Central Park. Like many others, she was attracted by the Jersey City construction boom that started about that time. Now she lives with her husband and six-year-old son near Hamilton Park, just blocks away from the embankment.

Meyer says the October celebration was scheduled during



RESERVOIR NO.3 ONCE PROVIDED WATER TO THE CITY
PHOTO: SANDRA SWIEDER PHOTOGRAPHY

the day to accommodate new members with young children. “We had an enormous turnout,” she says, a sign of public demand for park space in an ever-widening urban landscape.

TWO FORMULAS ARE USED to calculate the amount of park and recreation land necessary for city residents, according to the city’s Master Recreation Plan (RMP), which was completed in late 2006 but not yet integrated into the overall Master Plan. Currently 65 city-run parks covering 745 acres are listed in the RMP.

THIS URBAN OASIS LOOKS LIKE RURAL WILDERNESS

The Balanced Land Use formula is used by the New Jersey Green Acres Program, which provides funds to cities and towns to develop new parks. That formula calls for municipalities to set aside three percent of the city’s total area for recreation, which in the case of Jersey City would be 356 acres to be set aside for athletic fields and other recreation space. Currently, according to the RMP, there are only 143

THE SIXTH STREET EMBANKMENT IS NOT JUST ANY STONE WALL
PHOTO: LEON YOST



NATURE TRAILS, A WILDLIFE SANCTUARY, BOATHOUSE AND DOCK ARE SLATED FOR RESERVOIR NO. 3
PHOTO: SANDRA SWIEDER PHOTOGRAPHY

acres, or one percent of city land with athletic fields and other recreation space—a pittance for a population of 240,000.

Another formula, developed by the National Recreation and Park Association, recommends 10.5 acres of parkland per 1,000 people, which in the case of Jersey City would be 2,521 acres. To satisfy this formula, three Jersey City parks that are not run by the city would have to be included—the

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1,130-acre state-run Liberty State Park, and the 273-acre Lincoln Park and 21-acre Washington Park, both run by Hudson County.

Creating new park and recreation space is a tall order in a city where nearly every vacant lot is being eaten up by luxury housing and other residential units. But that hasn't stopped activists from advocating for new parks.

ALTHEA BERNHEIM KNOWS FIRSTHAND the need for a park in her neighborhood. Bernheim, along with her husband and three young children, live in a two-family house on Henry Street, a few blocks from the Journal Square PATH Station. The property, in an area called Hilltop, has one precious commodity—“A backyard, which we open to kids in the neighborhood who have no place to go,” Bernheim says.

“It's a sad thing.”

But sometimes her kids need more than a backyard, says Bernheim, who moved in 1999 from Metuchen, N.J., so that her husband could have an easier commute to New York City. She also brings her children, ages five, three and nine months, to Hamilton Park and Van Vorst Park, both Downtown, where they can play with other kids they've befriended over the years.

“People with young children tell me, ‘I'm moving to the suburbs because there isn't enough open space being created,’ Bernheim says. “In my area, a little park would make a big difference in keeping families from deciding to get up and leave.”

Bernheim says some new families moving into her area are making an effort to bring a park to their neighborhood. Plans call for a 100-square-foot fenced park with separate areas for children and dogs on an abandoned Conrail lot on Waldo Avenue.

RESERVING LAND FOR NATURE is also a crucial element of open-space planning. Since 2001 the Jersey City Reservoir Preservation Alliance has sought to preserve Reservoir No. 3, which once provided water to the city. On misty mornings water fowl can be seen coming in for a landing, breaking the perfect surface of the water. Except for the massive walls that enclose the reservoir and the tops of skyscrapers just visible in the distance, this urban oasis looks like rural wilderness.

The alliance in recent years successfully fought off plans for developing the reservoir for athletic fields or schools,

with hundreds of protesters ringing City Hall and attending City Council meetings. From April to October, the public can fish and canoe in the reservoir and enjoy watching the ospreys, red-tailed hawks, and sunfish that make their home there. But advocates are still working to secure the 13-acre space as a full-time nature preserve and park, operated by the city year-round, with such amenities as a perimeter trail, wildlife sanctuary, boathouse and dock.

Steve Latham, founder of the reservoir alliance, lives in the Heights and moved from Manhattan to Jersey City nearly 25 years ago. During that time, he says he has gone from a newcomer not really connected to his hometown to an open-space activist engaging his community in making the reservoir park a reality.

"When I first moved to Jersey City," he says, "people had an attitude of 'Who cares about nature?' It's not that they didn't respect nature, it was just they had other more pressing concerns. In a busy place like Jersey City, people are now going to look for a place where there's a slower pace and a connection to nature."

The reservoir alliance got support from Jersey City Mayor Jerramiah Healy last year for the nature-preserve concept but so far it remains just that—a concept.

ONE POLITICIAN WHO IS attacking the parks issue head on is City Councilman Steven Fulop. He says the Downtown area, which he represents, has a number of community groups that come to him with proposals for various parks projects.

"The renovation of Hamilton Park

"WHEN I FIRST MOVED TO JERSEY CITY, PEOPLE HAD AN ATTITUDE OF 'WHO CARES ABOUT NATURE?'"

has taken [several] years [to get underway] but this year we will start work," he says, "and the dog run at Van Vorst Park was in the works for God knows how long but it finally opened." Fulop worked closely with both Hamilton Park and Van Vorst neighborhood associations, which are very active.

Fulop also envisions parks being built in areas that might not be considered suitable. As an example, he

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