

MEMORANDUM

To: Nizjoni Granville, Chair
Michelle George, District Manager
Fred Monderson, Transportation
Atim Oton, 3rd Vice Chair, Economic Development
Priscilla Maddox, Economic Development
Glinda Andrews, Parks
Kim Albert, Parks

From: Robert Witherwax, 2nd Vice Chair

Date: April 9, 2012

RE: Creating New Public Open Space on Atlantic Avenue median between Nostrand Avenue and Ralph Avenue, under the L.I.R.R. Viaduct.

Some local community advocates hatched the core concept of repurposing the space under the Viaduct, and asked me to bring it before CB8. I think it has great merit, and this memorandum lays out my personal assessment of the current situation, options for potential improvements, and the first steps on the path forward.

I. Current Situation

A. Empty, Unused Space

As we all know, Atlantic Avenue is a major east/west arterial roadway and truck route, connecting downtown Brooklyn with points eastward. The roadway is divided by the elevated L.I.R.R. Viaduct, with multiple lanes on either side.

For the majority of its length, the space directly underneath the Viaduct (the “Median”) is empty and unused, and somewhat of an eyesore. It was most recently used as staging for the Viaduct Reconstruction project. At certain points, the Median does contain left turn lanes, where a lane runs directly underneath the Viaduct for less than half a block, enabling north or south turns onto the cross-avenues that do not impede east/west traffic. Other than these lanes, there is no current, specified use for any part of the Median.

B. Pedestrian Usage High, But Needs Improvement

Atlantic Avenue is also the boundary between CB3 and CB8, and between the historic neighborhoods of Bedford-Stuyvesant and Crown Heights. On the northern side of this boundary, Fulton Street is home to thriving businesses, multiple bus lines, and the A/C subway lines. Thousands of CB8 residents use the 11 north/south cross avenues to venture into CB3 to shop or to commute, crossing Atlantic Avenue twice daily.

Crossing Atlantic Avenue as a pedestrian can be challenging, given the multi-lane width between sidewalk and Median on both sides. For many of our seniors and children, this crossing cannot be made in one “Walk” cycle. On the Median, there is little sense of pedestrian security, and the signal lights are prioritized to move the motor traffic as efficiently as possible.

C. Street Life is Not Reflective of Community

Between the cross avenues, along the length of the Viaduct and Median, the blocks of Atlantic Avenue give no sense of the vibrant, vital communities that lie behind them. On

the southern/CB8 edge, there is a mix of commercial, residential, and manufacturing buildings, including hotels; many commercial enterprises focus on automobile trade (gas/service stations; business with large parking lots) rather than the pedestrian trade. On the northern/CB3 edge, the same mix is accompanied by a post office, St. Andrews Park, schools, and Interfaith Hospital. Development, flowing east from Atlantic Yards, has come, and is sure to continue to come, to these blocks, perhaps bringing hundreds of new residents. But currently, Atlantic Avenue acts as a barrier between two communities, as the outer edge instead of the thriving core; and the resulting overall impression of deadened, depressed street life predominates.

II. Potential Improvements

A. Vision of Public Space that Unites Bed-Stuy and Crown Heights

A creative and attractive transformation of the Median's wasted space can help overcome the current atmosphere of marginalization, and produce a valuable new resource for our communities, simply by providing a place for neighborhood residents to passively relax.

The elements of a successful public space already exist. There are literally acres of unused space available in the Median, amid communities that cry out for more open space. Thousands of people already move through this space on a daily basis, and need only some incentive to linger and partake of the open space and some safety enhancements. The potential for improvement in the streetfront of the Avenue itself cries out for a project that can re-center our communities' vision of themselves from two separate neighborhoods divided by this neglected afterthought of a road, into one larger community united along a vital, central boulevard. The elevated train line and extraordinarily busy arterial road are not insurmountable obstacles, but factors that could define a unique, successful open space.

B. Possible Models

Below I describe three possible models for the space. Given the scope of the space (1.5 miles), elements of each model could be deployed in various spots on the Median.

1. Pedestrian Plaza

The community advocates who made the initial suggestion had the NYC/DOT Public Plaza program in mind. (<http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/html/sidewalks/publicplaza.shtml>) Under that program DOT and local non-profit groups work together to identify, design, implement, and maintain open spaces, especially in areas lacking in such space. This program would provide the distinguishing characteristics of a plaza, possibly including differently treated surfaces, plantings, seating and furniture, barricades, etc. The local non-profit would provide maintenance and programming in the plaza. These streetscape improvements could also include safety enhancements to ease crossing the Avenue.

While thematically this program matches the vision for the Median, there are some potential problems. We would need to find local non-profits willing to partner on this space. Local examples include the Fulton Avenue Business (FAB) Alliance (Fowler Square and Putnam Triangle in CB2) and Bed Stuy Restoration (Marcy Avenue Plaza). Also, the site is far larger than any other individual plaza program on DOT's list, and a more efficient, comprehensive approach, such as that used for North Flatbush Avenue, or Broadway in Manhattan, might fit better. On the other hand, installing plazas on one or two blocks or intersections might be better first step.

2. Market

A recent Daily News article (<http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/uptown/inverted-high-line-envisioned-harlem-turn-a-miracle-la-marqueta-article-1.1057016>) describes another potential, more commercially-minded vision that could be introduced at strategic points along the Median. Arraying small, mom-and-pop businesses along the Median could draw residents here to shop, provide jobs for locals, and give a renewed sense of purpose to the avenue.

3. Parks

The “High Line”, in Manhattan, has achieved great success as a park and public space, by putting people on train tracks above the street. Possibly, a similar effect could be achieved here, by putting people on the street below the train tracks, in a “Low Line” park. The sheer expanse of the space between the columns of the Viaduct on each block could easily accommodate several basketball courts, handball courts, street hockey, etc. with proper fencing to keep players (and equipment) from straying into the Avenue. Artificial turf could be laid down. Shaded by the Viaduct, there would be no “heat island” effect, and the space would be a shady, cool refuge from the heat of the city.

The Median, it has been established, is city-owned property, under the control of the Department of Transportation. However, transfer of the property to another city or state agency such as the Department of Parks and Recreation is theoretically possible.

III. Proposed Next Steps

Two questions must be answered: Is anyone interested in using it? And, is the space even usable for any purpose? To the first question, if CB8 sees any merit in this proposal, it should reach out to CB3 and DOT, to assess the collective sense of possibility.

To the second question, for the space to be usable it must be safe, from the trains above; from the cars alongside; and from the risks of isolating people in between multiple lanes of traffic with limited egress, i.e. the potential for crime and the potential for accidents. The borders of the space must be permeable enough to let people come and go and not be trapped inside, but at the same time only proper crosswalks with traffic controls should be used. If these safeties cannot be guaranteed, then the project is a non-starter.

IV. Conclusion

I advocate that CB8 explore ways to leverage the Median (tremendous unused space, large daily foot traffic, adjacent communities and organizations) within the limits of practicality (the requirement of the existing rail and road infrastructures, budgetary constraints).