

GROWTH STRATEGIES

CityWide Growth: The Hub

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"The Hub," where Third, Melrose, Willis and Westchester Avenues and 149th Street intersect at Roberto Clemente Plaza, was once the commercial center of The Bronx. After years of decline, plans are afoot for its revival. Senator Schumer's "Group of 35" report and others have recognized that, by virtue of its transit and road access, its dense population affording retail market and workforce opportunities, and its stock of renovatable buildings The Hub and surrounding districts are a near term space resource for back office uses, IT/software companies, educational and other non-profit organizations, and other uses that do not require midtown or downtown locations. With The Bronx's resurgence, this area is ripe for investment to develop its potential as one of New York City's sub-regional business centers.

Until the 1950's, The Hub was a thriving business district. It remains an ideally situated retail and office location owing to its convenient access and its proximity to Manhattan and to the regional labor force. The Hub is The Bronx's third largest shopping district, its retail sales exceeded only by Fordham Road and Bay Plaza. Transit service includes two subway lines, the Melrose Avenue Metro-North stop and seven bus routes. The Hub enjoys excellent vehicular access from Manhattan via the Willis Avenue, 138th Street and 145th Street Bridges; Long Island via the Triborough Bridge; and from points north via the Major Deegan Expressway.

Owing to the dense population within its market radius, The Hub offers a strong retail trade area despite relatively low incomes. This population also provides a local labor force. While ground level storefronts are active with bargain shopping, over 200,000 vacant square feet is available on upper stories. Many of these buildings have large floor plates with relatively few columns, lending themselves to renovation for offices, IT/software companies and educational uses. They could be made available in the short term. New construction on vacant sites in the area will help establish the critical mass necessary to attract businesses, and to restore The Hub's image.

Since the mid-1980's, residential communities surrounding The Hub have been revitalized with over \$2 billion invested in housing and other development. The former Hearn building has been modernized by the South Bronx Overall Development Corporation (SOBRO) for use as its headquarters and offices for a not-for-profit agency. The New York City Economic Development Corporation has recently designated two major developers, Starrett Corporation and Related Retail Corporation, to purchase four vacant city-owned sites in The Hub. Starrett plans to construct a 492,000 square foot office and retail complex with on-site parking. Related proposes to build 226,000 square feet of retail and office space and to renovate an existing garage. Thus, The Hub is poised for a revival as a business center.

In 1993, a community based planning effort initiated by Borough President Fernando Ferrer produced the Bronx Center Plan for a 300-block area stretching from 147th to 165th Streets, St. Ann's Avenue to the Harlem River. The Plan sought to capitalize on the area's strengths and potential by integrating its anchors—The Hub as its commercial center, Yankee Stadium, the Bronx Terminal Market, the Municipal Center, Melrose Commons housing, Lincoln Hospital, the Police Academy and Hostos College into a vibrant downtown and sub-regional center within New York City which would transform and uplift this community while enhancing the City as a regional marketplace.

In September 1998, Borough President Ferrer released his plan, consistent with the Bronx Center Plan, to retain the Yankees in The Bronx. In addition to renovation of Yankee Stadium as a state-of-the-art ballpark, the Yankee Village plan envisions a year round sports entertainment center, a destination regional shopping center, significant improvements to the transportation infrastructure and parks, and commercial revitalization on adjacent streets. "Safe at Home: The Yankees in the Bronx" may be viewed at www.bpferrer.org.

In July 2001, a committee spearheaded by Borough President Fernando Ferrer and chaired by New York National Bank President Serafin Mariel released a proposal for this area's resurgence as a competitive retail and commercial center as envisioned in the Bronx Center Plan. "Discovering the Center: a vision plan for The Bronx Hub" offers a framework for action to restore this strategically located district. Local banks donated funds to engage the City College Architectural Center (CCAC) as consultants to prepare the report.

The planning concepts emerged from a community-based Vision Planning Process which engaged Hub residents, merchants and property owners to form a consensus on measures that would improve this central area as a place to live, work and shop. Participants expressed their thoughts about the problems affecting quality of life in the HUB, and suggested solutions. Using ideas generated by residents and merchants, CCAC developed a set of strategies to create a more welcoming and relaxed atmosphere for shoppers and a more user-friendly transit mode. It suggests such features as pedestrian plazas, elevated pedestrian passageways, kiosks, speed bumps, realigned bus routes, seating areas, rest rooms, water sculptures, trees and lighting. Following are some elements of the proposal:

Ease transportation conflicts

- Improve traffic patterns, relieve effects of heavy vehicle volume and multiple bus routes
- Create a surface transportation zone

Vehicle free zones (except for trucks and buses), restricted truck delivery hours, new traffic flow pattern to expedite through traffic and access to parking facilities

- Reroute certain bus routes

Install planted traffic medians, new subway entrance

Foster a sustainable mix of activities for a healthy downtown

- Improve public spaces including Roberto Clemente Plaza

Widen and redesign sidewalks, develop an open air seasonal market on Westchester Avenue

Reveal architectural character of existing commercial buildings

- Adopt design guidelines for façade improvements and for new buildings to maintain street wall continuity

Reestablish the physical density and proximity of uses typical of a downtown core

- Renovate upper story space, market upper story space in larger buildings for back office needs, city agencies and not-for-profits
- Develop new mixed use buildings with larger floor plates on vacant sites.

Senator Schumer's Group of 35 identified the Hub as an "ancillary business district" in its report "Preparing for the Future: A Commercial Development Strategy for New York City." In fact, the task force adopted Hub Committee's vision. This includes the development of new office space for governmental functions or firms which can no longer afford prices in Manhattan, the re-use of under-utilized existing office and loft buildings, retail anchor stores and streetscape improvements.

The Hub lies within the state Port Morris Empire Zone which offers prospective employers tax and energy benefits. In addition, NYC programs such as REAP and ICIP are available to businesses that relocate to the Hub (as well as elsewhere in The Bronx).