

April 9th, 2020

Queens Community Board 2

Denise Keehan-Smith, Chairwoman

Sheila Lewandowski, Chair of Transportation Committee

Debra Markell Kleinert, District Manager

Greetings-

On behalf of our board of directors I am writing to express our concerns over the proposed Vernon Blvd Bulkhead Restoration plan (submitted to Queens CB2 April 6th, 2020 - attached separately). Redesigning this street-end site has been a priority for our organization and many of our partner groups for two decades. There have been numerous community-led visions for the site since before there was a bulkhead collapse (Winter 2016), and even before an adjacent street-end park was completed on the Brooklyn side of the Creek (Spring 2009). Each iteration of community-design has focused on utilizing this city-owned shoreline to create public access to the water and incorporate environmental improvements such as planted areas and stormwater management. We oppose any plan for the site that fails to generate these public benefits. Outlined below is greater detail on these issues and considerations for moving forward.

The Importance of Water Access

Despite it's near 11 miles of shoreline, the Newtown Creek is severely limited in public access. There are currently only a handful of places where the public can safely access the shoreline: the Newtown Creek Nature Walk, Manhattan Avenue Street End Park, Greenpoint Landing, and Hunters Point Park South. Of these sites, only one is on the Queens side of the Creek, leaving the borough nearly devoid of real access to the waterway on its southwest border. Such a lack of access prohibits those of us who work and/or live locally the opportunity to experience the natural resource that is our estuary. Despite it's Superfund designation, the Newtown Creek is recovering with schools of fish, colonies of mussels and populations of crabs returning to these historically polluted waters. Without access and the opportunity for personal connection, the waterway is literally overlooked, underappreciated and left in a state of negligence. Many residents and community groups are working to change the tide on our relationship to Newtown Creek but despite our advocacy efforts and educational programs, we need actual physical spaces that allow people to engage with the water, not just look at it or learn about it from afar. Furthermore, every square foot of open space that is created within Long Island City, especially those overlooking our open waters, improves public health and quality of life for such a rapidly developing area. Access can take many forms from seating near the water, get down steps to the water's edge and boating infrastructure such as a dock for launching and landing kayaks, canoes and other small boats. We strongly believe that the City needs to utilize publically accessible city-owned areas, like Vernon Blvd, to achieve these goals.

Environmental Benefits

The areas surrounding Newtown Creek are plagued by numerous environmental hazards that present risk to human and ecological health. Such hazards include the loss of native vegetation and wildlife habitat, both within the water, intertidal zone and upland areas. Vegetation, like trees and native plants, provide numerous environmental benefits including the reduction of urban heat island effect, improvements to local air quality, habitat for various insect and bird species and absorption of stormwater runoff. Additionally, living and working in areas with increased planting and tree density have well known benefits for human

health and psychological improvements. On the water side, Newtown Creek has lost nearly all remnants of a natural intertidal habitat. The 1,200 acres of salt marsh that once surrounded Newtown Creek were all destroyed by the mid 20th century. In recent years the City has reintroduced salt marsh habitat locally at Hunter's Point Parks South and a DEP Pilot Marsh in the Dutch Kills tributary. These efforts are based on established research that demonstrates both ecological and resilience benefits as well as support from local community advocates and organizations. There is tremendous opportunity to increase natural habitats and green spaces near Newtown Creek and we firmly believe that any and all projects involving redesigned shorelines, especially those that are led by NYC, should aim to incorporate such features. The street end of Vernon Blvd is an ideal place to install tree canopy, green infrastructure, pollinator gardens, and/or intertidal habitat.

Community Input

As referenced above there already exist numerous iterations of community-led designs for this street end that have been developed over the past two decades. The DOT and EDC should not only consider these previous designs, but seek a similar process that allows for thorough input from stakeholder organizations, businesses and community members. Below is a list of previous community-led design plans:

The Newtown Creek Vision Plan, 2018¹

Riverkeeper, Newtown Creek Alliance and Perkins+Will

<http://www.newtowncreekalliance.org/newtown-creek-vision-plan/> (see pages 64 - 71)

Manufactured Ecology on the Industrial Edge: Reclaiming the Vernon Blvd Waterfront at Newtown Creek, 2006

New Yorkers for Parks and Jones Lang LaSalle

http://www.newtowncreekalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Vernon_Boulevard_Waterfront_JLL_NY4P_2006.pdf

Newtown Creek Community Planning Process, 2000

Place in History, the Queens Department of City Planning, the New York City Council, Jamie Purinton and Matthew Potteiger

http://www.placeinhistory.org/projects/newtown_creek/

http://www.newtowncreekalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/NewtownCreek_VernonBlvd_drawings.pdf

In closing, we look forward to working with CB2, NYCDOT and NYCEDC in a more participatory fashion to realize a street-end redesign that provides local and ecological benefit and is reflective of community needs, concerns and desires. A rebuilt shoreline here can have positive impacts for Long Island City and Newtown Creek for decades to come.

Sincerely,



Willis Elkins

Executive Director

¹ * *This plan was recommended in the New Yorkers for Parks Long Island City Open Space Index:*
http://www.ny4p.org/client-uploads/pdf/OSI/NY4P_Long_Island_City_Open_Space_Index.pdf



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Rob Basch, Hunters Point Parks Conservancy
Erik Baard, HarborLAB
Dorothy Morehead, Queens CB2
Michael Marrella, NYC Department of City Planning
Mitch Waxman, Newtown Creek Alliance

About NCA

The Newtown Creek Alliance (<http://www.newtowncreekalliance.org/>) is a community-based organization dedicated to restoring, revealing and revitalizing Newtown Creek in the boroughs of Queens and Brooklyn. We represent the interests of community residents and local businesses that are dedicated to restoring community health, water quality, habitat, access and vibrant, water-dependent commerce along Newtown Creek. NCA works to restore the Creek by securing mitigation and remediation of known environmental hazards – both in the neighborhoods surrounding Newtown Creek and in Newtown Creek itself – reporting ongoing sources of pollution and preventing new pollution. To restore the ecological functions of the waterway, NCA supports investments in green infrastructure, bioremediation, and habitat restoration. We help revitalize watershed communities by playing a leadership role in area-wide brownfield redevelopment planning, creating programs that improve the environmental profile of industrial businesses and engaging in workforce development to create local green jobs. Our work supports environmental, economic and human health.