

Big Projects And Bad News

by Tom Angotti

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It seems like a bad season for New York City megaprojects. The proposed BJ's in the Bronx and Wal-Mart in Queens are history. The Jets stadium in Manhattan and Atlantic Yards project in Brooklyn are facing new roadblocks every day. But even if all these projects were to join the pantheon of Big Apple deals that went rotten, what follows in their wake could be more of the same. The groups who oppose these projects because of the impacts they would have on surrounding communities still have to live with land use and zoning rules that make possible the emergence of new versions of the same old deals.

BJ's and Wal-Mart

Organized labor was a key force in killing the proposals for a BJ's in the Bronx and Wal-Mart in Queens even before they got to the formal approval stage. The labor practices of these retail giants would have lowered the wage bar for the entire retail economy. But labor paid very little attention to the land use and environmental impacts of big box stores and could very well look the other way when the next megastore proposal hits the streets. They've already taken the heat off the Rego Park developer who was going to play host to Wal-Mart. The alternative to Wal-Mart in Rego Park and elsewhere is likely to be a different brand of suburban-style mall with the same acres of parking and traffic snarls, a mammoth building that looks like a fortress, and price gouging practices that undermine local businesses. The city's land use regulations allow such planning disasters that destroy public spaces, undermine public transit, endanger pedestrians, and destroy neighborhoods.

The zoning code is crying out for an overhaul to deal with these issues. The idea of a one-year moratorium on new superstores that's being proposed by some City Council members makes sense because it would give the City Planning Department and City Council time to come up with sensible rules that require giant retailers to adapt to our cosmopolitan city of developed neighborhoods. The City Council should also require that all large-scale projects be consistent with official neighborhood plans.

Reports are that Wal-Mart is cruising for another New York City site and this time could come with its guns loaded. Since the demands of labor and their allies don't extend to neighborhood impacts, Wal-Mart could make a few concessions to mollify labor critics so they can get their foot in New York's door. The world's biggest retail corporation could buy neighborhood support in areas long neglected by the city and private sector. Neighborhoods like Red Hook in Brooklyn are vulnerable because the city has let huge swaths of industrially-zoned land sit vacant for decades. Ikea already plans to take over a chunk of prime waterfront land to sell its tables and chairs. Red Hook and outer-borough neighborhoods like it could get inundated with megastores, creating weekend traffic jams and environmental disasters in once-quiet communities.

Another scenario is that Wal-Mart and its competitors will follow the example of the Chelsea Home Depot and limit themselves to sites where customers have to use mass transit or walk. These stores can add to the city's lively sidewalk culture instead of killing it. But the city's land use and zoning policies don't encourage such comfortable fits.

The Jets Stadium

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority has opened up its Hudson Yards site on the west side of Manhattan to competitive bidding and put aside for the moment the deal with the Jets football team to build their stadium there. State legislative leaders have declared that any plan for the Hudson Yards site requires their approval. Local community and business groups could hold up the stadium proposal in court long after July of this year, when the International Olympic Committee will decide whether New York will be the site of the 2012 Olympics.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg could have overplayed his hand on the stadium when he insisted on linking approval of the Jets stadium to the city's Olympics bid. He could still decide to cut his losses and announce before July that the Olympics stadium will be in Queens (though a few Queens neighborhoods may have something to say about this), or he could privately assure the Olympic committee that he'll switch to Queens later on if he has to. But

right now he's painted himself into a corner by declaring that it's Hudson Yards or bust.

The Nets Arena

Since the Metropolitan Transportation Authority set a precedent by calling for competitive bidding on the Hudson Yards site, how can they make a sweetheart deal with Forest City Ratner for the Atlantic Yards site in Brooklyn? This logical question has punctured the public debate about Ratner's idea of putting a 19,000-seat Nets basketball arena, at least 4,500 apartments and a million square feet of office space over an active rail yard and surrounding blocks. Ratner is facing stiff community opposition, could have trouble fulfilling his promises to the local groups that support him, and may have to take a look at an alternative plan put together by his critics.

Added to all of this are all the unanswered questions about financing these huge projects. The public tab for the Manhattan stadium, including direct and indirect subsidies, could reach in the billions. A recently released study of the Atlantic Yards project by the [Pratt Institute Center for Community & Environmental Development](#) guesses that deal could cost taxpayers another billion. And all this coincides with an announcement that \$1.3 billion will be cut from the School Construction Authority. More city schools will go without athletic facilities and childhood obesity will spread while season ticket-holders for the Jets and Nets get comfortable seats. In the meantime, the City Council is now considering bills that would require council approval for all subsidies, prevent the use of the city's capital funds for land acquisition, and [require that payments in lieu of taxes go into the city's general revenue fund](#). This latter item could limit the use of the mayor's "creative" financing approach that would rob the city budget to pay back bonds to finance the megaprojects.

So it's bad news time for big projects. Don't get me wrong. I don't think bigness is necessarily bad. The problem is that the city doesn't plan in partnership with its neighborhoods to deal with new development, large and small. The big projects just have much bigger impacts and the consequences of poor planning are more dramatic. Too many giant projects are driven by corporate developers that have rigid business plans and suburban-style designs, and at best buy off potential opposition with meaningless promises and palliatives. How about having community plans that incorporate the kind of new development that's needed? Let the giants conform to our rules if they want to play in our ballfield. That way New Yorkers and not the Nets can control their destiny.

Tom Angotti is Professor of Urban Affairs and Planning at Hunter College, City University of NY, editor of Progressive Planning Magazine, and a member of the Task Force on Community-based Planning.

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