

Making Coney Island Green

by Tom Angotti

19 Sep 2007



Photo by: Herb Bar-David.

The city took a step toward sustaining historic Coney Island this summer when it put a [roadblock](#) in front of a \$1.5 billion plan by [Thor Equities](#) to turn the legendary area into a resort enclave. As New Yorkers warmed up on Coney's beaches, the administration threw cold water on the proposal to speed up the rides and bring in hotels and time-shares. Thor's scaled-back plan, which included a glass-enclosed water park, three hotels and 400 time-share units, restaurants, movie theaters and high-tech arcades, was a bit much even for a city administration that likes to think big.

Now the question is whether the city can come up with an alternative that helps to sustain and build up what is left of the storied amusement area. Will they be able to do it without a mega-developer like Thor? And will the city continue to react to the schemes put forth by private developers rather than coming up with ideas of its own?

As incongruous as it might seem, Coney Island, with its honky-tonk image, could become a model of sustainable development. If the city wants that to happen, it could look to some key decisions already made at Coney.

Where's the Plan?

New York City's long-range sustainability plan, [PlaNYC2030](#), says little about unique areas like Coney Island, which don't fit in the category of residential neighborhood or an average business district. However, Coney Island redevelopment could play an important role in meeting the plan's objectives of insuring that all New Yorkers live within a 10-minute walk of open space, cleaning up the city's waterways, improving mass transit and air quality and reducing global warming.

If the past is any indication, the way to accomplish these objectives is through carefully thought-out small steps over a long period of time instead of giant commercial adventures and "big ideas." For example, long before PlaNYC2030, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority renovated the [Stillwell Avenue](#) subway station, making it the greenest, most energy-efficient subway station in the city. Completed in 2006, the station has photovoltaic panels that provide solar energy and an open design that maximizes the use of natural sunlight. This example of smart design and public policy has given a small boost to the private amusement area and to many nearby public facilities.

Previously, the city preserved the [Cyclone](#), Coney Island's famed roller coaster that opened in 1927. It became a city landmark in 1988 and a federal landmark in 1991. This mostly wooden structure remains an icon of the amusement area, marking its identity as distinct from the kind of high-tech, high-priced theme parks epitomized

by Six Flags.

The corporate amusement giants also cannot replicate the non-profit, [Coney Island USA](#), a focal point for many unique cultural and civic groups that have helped keep the historic area alive. And in yet another small step, the city government and the [Coney Island Development Corporation](#) now plan to develop [Steeplechase Plaza](#), a public park that would feature a restored [B&B Carousel](#).

So it may be smarter for the city to think smaller and move one step at a time. The popularity of the relatively tiny Nellie Bly Amusement Park, only a couple of miles from Coney Island near Bensonhurst's waterfront, suggests that many small parks might work better than one big one.

Stadiums On The Island?

In an earlier effort to spark development at Coney Island, the city encouraged the building of [Keyspan Park](#), where the [Brooklyn Cyclones](#) minor league baseball team plays. This was a questionable addition to Coney Island's waterfront when it was built during the Giuliani administration. The minor league field broke the classical Coney Island model that combined amusement park, beach and boardwalk. Stadiums for professional teams and leagues are great for team owners and the health and welfare of the small number of athletes who play in the stadiums, but do little more than encourage the sedentary lifestyle and junk food binging that contribute to the city's epidemics of obesity and diabetes.

Still, compared to the monster Shea and Yankee Stadiums, Keyspan Park has opened the door to a different kind of professional sports. Much smaller than the baseball behemoths, Keyspan is only a stone's throw from the boardwalk, beach and the Abe Stark skating rink and within walking distance of the amusement park. With affordable ticket prices and easy access via mass transit, it attracts families with limited recreational options in their neighborhoods and works as part of a daily outing. On the other hand, Shea and Yankee stadiums function as enclosed enclaves, attracting a large fan base that drives to the games, and they funnel people in and out as quickly as possible.

And why not put the arena for the Nets basketball team in Coney Island, as planner Simon Bertrang [proposes](#)? Two previous studies recommended Coney Island as a location for a professional arena, and until recently that view was held by [Brooklyn's political establishment](#). Wouldn't the 18,000 seat arena that the basketball team's owner, Forest City Ratner, now proposes to cram in between the Prospect Heights and Fort Greene neighborhoods make more sense nested in Coney Island's amusement area?

If this were to happen – the Nets could lose \$35 million every year the Atlantic Yards project is delayed -- a Coney Island arena should not go the way of the [New York Aquarium](#), which is isolated from the amusement park. Nor should it be dropped in next to Keyspan Park, thereby creating a big enclave of professional facilities. But if properly designed, the home court for the Nets could be physically integrated with Coney Island's recreational facilities.

The City's Role

The heart of Coney's surviving amusement area, [Astroland Amusement Park](#), closed for the season on September 9. The owner of the land, [Thor Equities](#), may very well decide not to renew Astroland's lease for next year's season, although a petition campaign is underway to prevent this from happening.

Lacking the kind of public or private commitment given to the Cyclone and B&B Carousel, no amusement park can survive and keep prices affordable to average New Yorkers. Thor wants public subsidies to support any amusements it puts on the site.

In light of this, it is hard to imagine any steps at Coney Island going forward until the administration takes a more direct role in development. Plans to rezone the area are simply not enough. Zoning leaves the door open for development but can't make it happen, nor does it guarantee preservation.

For a number of reasons, Coney Island cries out for an active city role. If we look to the year 2030 and beyond, Coney Island will probably be one of the most vulnerable areas to rising sea levels. While Coney's 60,000 residents may be willing to risk flooding and evacuation, it certainly makes no sense to encourage more

permanent housing there. Millions of dollars in public subsidies already go to maintain Coney Island's beach and protect it from erosion. When will the cost of such efforts exceed the public benefit?

Beyond this, a strong public role is imperative if Coney Island is to remain affordable to New Yorkers, both as a place to live and a place to play. Today the park and recreation areas are a boon for New Yorkers with limited incomes and for Brooklynites. Preserving affordability on what was once known as America's playground is as important as saving the Cyclone and is consistent with PlaNYC2030's aim of preserving affordable housing.

See: [Coney Island's Summer of Reckoning](#) and [With Pizza, Pinball and Panache, Boardwalk Vendors Face Changes](#)

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.

Gotham Gazette is brought to you by [Citizens Union Foundation](#). It is made possible by a grants from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the Altman Foundation, the Fund for the City of New York, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, New York Times Foundation, the Charles H. Revson Foundation, the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and readers like you. Please consider making a [tax-deductible contribution](#).

Gotham Gazette - <http://www.gothamgazette.com/article/landuse/20070919/12/2290>