

A Vision for New Rochelle

Plan for Revitalizing the City Park Neighborhood

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May 2001

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2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Fifth Avenue or City Park area of New Rochelle became the subject of national attention earlier this year when community residents organized to stop the demolition of this mixed-use neighborhood and subsequent construction of a 308,000 square foot IKEA furniture store. A local group, the New Rochelle Citizens' Committee, enlisted the expertise of Columbia University to assess the proposed store's impact and produce alternative development plans for the neighborhood if big-box was found not to be the best solution. Two weeks into the project, IKEA announced it would not build a store in New Rochelle. Although the company cited the prohibitive costs of necessary traffic infrastructure, it is likely that strong community opposition was also a consideration.

The Studio's proposal for the future of City Park expanded the initial study area to encompass a larger area within both New Rochelle and Mamaroneck. This change incorporated adjacent areas that lie within the natural boundaries of the neighborhood. A study of existing conditions included planning history, neighborhood character, demographics, land use, building conditions, political conditions, housing issues, and an in-depth look at the industrial and manufacturing base of the area. A participatory planning model was used to survey residents and businesses and engage their participation in the plans for their neighborhood. Neighborhood meetings were held periodically to assess the progress of the studio. Included in the dialogue were the residents of the MacLeay Apartments, a subsidized, three-building apartment complex on Fifth Avenue.

The proposal also contains an assessment of the tax structure of New Rochelle and its impact on planning and development. New Rochelle's budget has been suffering from the effects of a cap on property tax assessments imposed by the New York State legislature in exchange for an increase in the sales tax rate. The City then began to focus on generating revenue from new sales tax sources. The proposed IKEA store would have generated a substantial new revenue stream for the city of New Rochelle. The costs to the City Park neighborhood and the region, however, would have been significant, including a loss of hundreds of high paying industrial jobs, and a decrease in the quality of life for surrounding residential neighborhoods.

The Studio has concluded that the preservation and reinforcement of the neighborhood's industrial base is the most desirable goal for any development plan at City Park. The studio has analyzed the City Park area in the context of the trends in manufacturing and light industrial activities in New York City, Westchester County and the State of New York, including spatial resource issues, wages and multiplier effects.

The proposal includes the exploration of many tools to encourage strong industrial growth, including the formation of a non-profit Local Development Corporation led by neighborhood businesses and residents. Other tools include marketing, and the adoption of a cooperative planning and development approach with surrounding municipalities.

In addition to industrial enhancement, the proposal highlights several other areas for improvement at City Park. Traffic mitigation and infrastructure changes are necessary for safety and increased accessibility. Re-zoning will manage future growth and permit the expansion of the industrial base. The proposed zoning will also allow for small retail establishments along the Fifth Avenue streetfront, primarily for local use.

Finally, the proposal seeks to encourage New Rochelle's recent efforts to recreate a strong retail base in downtown New Rochelle by recommending design guidelines and new initiatives, including the creation of a historic district. The proposal also includes a framework for a possible redesign of Echo Bay, now the site of the city's maintenance yard.

The Studio maintains a website with reports, studies, graphs, charts, analyses, maps and related materials about the New Rochelle Project at:

www.columbia.edu/itc/architecture/bass/newrochelle/index.html

3. INTRODUCTION

This report is the product of a one-semester studio class of twelve first-year graduate students pursuing Master of Science degrees in urban planning at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation. The studio, which began in January 2001 and was led by Richard Bass of Herrick, Feinstein LLP, set out to evaluate a proposal for building an IKEA furniture store in the City Park neighborhood of New Rochelle in Westchester County, New York. Our goal at the outset was to either approve IKEA's plan, improve the plan, or propose an alternative. Three weeks into our studio, IKEA's withdrawal of its proposal moved use straight to the latter option.

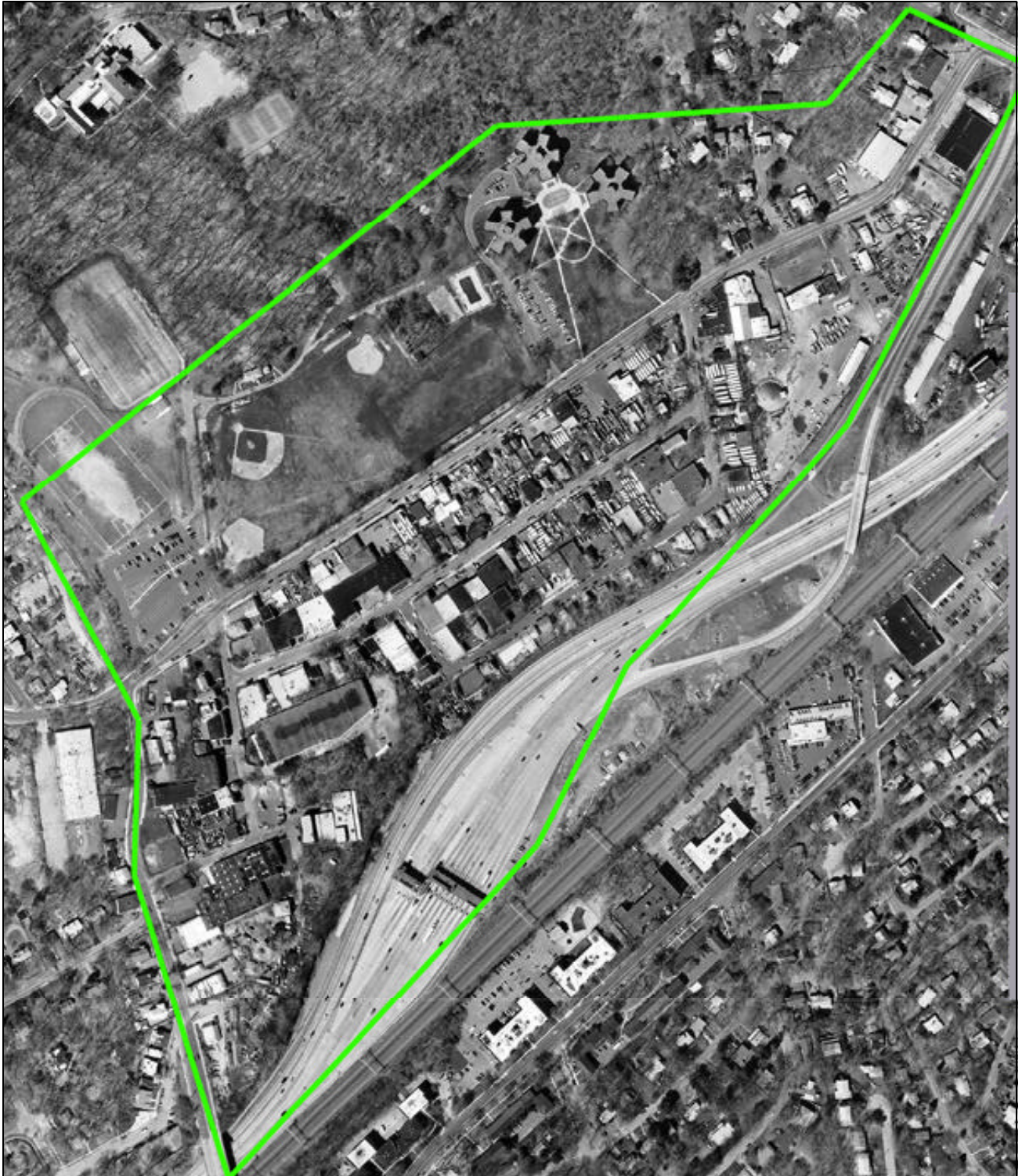
In formulating a vision to replace that of a 308,000 square foot furniture store, we interviewed neighborhood residents and business owners as well as city, county, and state officials; performed land use and business surveys of the area; examined social, economic, and demographic data at the city and county level; and analyzed the economic impacts of retail and industrial land uses on the region's economy.

In our analyses, we expanded our study area from IKEA's proposed redevelopment area, which was roughly bounded by Fifth Avenue on the north, I-95 (the Thruway) on the south, Portman Avenue on the west, and the Mamaroneck town line on the east. The broader region we chose to study, encompassing the organic boundaries of the neighborhood, was defined by the northern boundary of City Park and the MacLeay Apartments property on the north, I-95 on the south, Potter Avenue on the west, and Madison Avenue in the Town of Mamaroneck on the east. At Madison Avenue, Fifth Avenue ends, and the City Park area's main through route bends to approach downtown Larchmont and the neighborhood's only Thruway entrance (see map on opposite page

Our study area represents the neighborhood as it is defined organically by related uses and "edges" such as the Thruway. The area is zoned M-1 and consists primarily of light industrial uses, though residences coexist comfortably with industrial businesses. Just north of the industrial section of the study area are City Park and the MacLeay Apartments, a residential complex constructed as public housing in 1949. Although MacLeay is now privately owned, many of its tenants receive government rent subsidies.

We found that the needs of the community and the region as a whole can best be met by the reinforcement of light industrial activity in this area. Not only will this retain and create relatively high-paying jobs for residents of New Rochelle and the City Park neighborhood, but it will also help to meet a strong demand for light industrial space in Westchester County.

Aerial Photograph of Expanded Study Area



4. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Andretta Construction
Richard Bass, Adjunct Professor, MS Urban Planning Program,
Columbia University and Senior Analyst, Herrick, Feinstein, LLP (Chief Guru)
Larry Bortoluzzi, US Dept. of Housing and Urban Development
Nanette Bourne, Allee, King, Rosen and Fleming, Inc.
Noam Bramson, City Council Member, District #5
Ed Burroughs, Planning Department, Westchester County
City Park Residents
Elcan Industries
Anderson Fils-Aime, member of New Rochelle Citizens Committee
Fradan Industries
Adam Friedman, Executive Director, New York Industrial Retention Network
Mindy Fullilove, School of Public Health, Columbia University
David Gallagher, Long Island City Business Development Corporation
Jim Gdula, President of IKEA Urban General Partners
Mayor Timothy Idoni, City of New Rochelle
George Kruse, Forest City Daly
Marble America
MacLeay Apartment Residents
Phil Marwill, Burson-Marsteller
Rashmi Mehta, Department of Public Works, City of New Rochelle
Montesano Brothers
Michael Monxhwedey, Management Information Systems, City of New Rochelle
North Star Electric
Valerie O’Keeffe, Director of Planning for the Town of Mamaroneck
Ortho-Rite Products
Ana Puszkina-Chevlin, Assistant Director, MS Urban Planning Program,
Columbia University GSAP and New Rochelle Resident
Howard Rattner, City of New Rochelle, Director of Finance
Renzo Auto Springs
Mike Ritchie, Commissioner of Development for the City of New Rochelle
Elliott Sclar, Director, MS Urban Planning Program,
Columbia University GSAP and Larchmont Resident
Southern NY Bus Sales
Assemblyman Ronald C. Tocci
Van Waters & Rogers
Vernon Devices
Teri Waivada, the director of the Westchester County IDA
Wilco Energy
Woodraska Roofing
WRAIN: John Verney, Diane Stawly, Adrian Arback, TJ Russo, Laura Brett,
Tom & Colette McMahon, Josephine MacManon, Dominic & Virginia Gattalotto,
Sean Comp, Dave Newmark, MaryBeth Jordan, Jerry Newmark, Susan Goldberger,
Albert Jones
Jeff Zilkin, Platzner Realty