

# The Brooklyn Paper

BrooklynPaper.com BROOKLYN HEIGHTS - DOWNTOWN EDITION Saturday, October 2, 2004

## GUEST OPINION

### Why Red Hook Ikea project should be rejected

By Mary Campbell Gallagher

**D**REAM THAT YOU are returning to New York three years from now, in September 2007, flying over the harbor. Ahead are the sparkling towers of lower Manhattan.

To your left, the Statue of Liberty raises her flaming torch 395 feet above the water, a symbol of America. But what is this? On the Brooklyn waterfront to your right rises a new structure as big as five football fields. Thousands of cars head towards it, it is surrounded by 1500 parked cars, and it is the blue and yellow colors of the Swedish flag.

Unfortunately, that giant blue box with yellow lettering is a symbol, too, just like Lady Liberty. It is not a symbol of America's hope and greatness, however, but of New York City's desperation. For on September 8, 2004, the City Planning Commission voted to sell out our peerless New York City waterfront to a Scandinavian company named Ikea.

Yes, it is a nightmare. But wake up! We are still in 2004. New Yorkers can still tell the City Council to keep the Brooklyn waterfront from turning into sprawl.

Ikea's argument for its gigantic tax-subsidized store is that it can provide jobs for tenants in the Red Hook Houses, a public housing project.

Ikea's reps have divided the community: the residents of the Red Hook Houses, who are largely African-American, from their neighbors who have refurbished dilapidated structures.

Ikea says it will create "500 or 600 jobs," The Red Hook Civic Association, meanwhile, says that Ikea will attract 50,000 cars a week to the point of the Red Hook peninsula, which has no highway, no subway and narrow cobblestone streets.

#### Questions that the City Planning Commission has failed to ask Ikea:

- Exactly how many unemployed people are there in Red Hook Houses? ANSWER. There are 569 unemployed people.
- How many jobs in large retail stores are there in Red Hook now? ANSWER. According to John

McGettrick, co-chairman of the Red Hook Civic Association, there already are, or soon will be more than a thousand retail jobs in Red Hook. Employee turnover in retail is 40 to 60 percent a year, so there is a constant availability of retail jobs.

- If we permit Ikea's tax-subsidized store on the waterfront, how many jobs does Ikea promise to Red Hook's people? ANSWER. None. Not even one.
- What does Ikea promise? ANSWER. Ikea promises only that it will consider applications from Brooklyn's 11231 ZIP Code two weeks earlier than other applications.
- Ikea says it will offer "close to 600" jobs in Red Hook. In the New Haven, Conn., store it just opened, however, Ikea has only 350 employees in a 311,000 square-foot store. Why would Ikea need 600 employees in a store in Brooklyn with 346,000 square feet? Lots of greeters? ANSWER. Silence. There is no answer to this question.
- Does Ikea offer employee benefits? ANSWER. Ikea offers employee benefits, including health benefits and tuition reimbursement. The majority of Ikea's employees will work fewer than 20 hours per week, and they will get no benefits for six months. Considering the high turnover in retail, Ikea may never pay even one worker from Red Hook Houses any benefits at all.
- Won't Ikea destroy other jobs in Red Hook? ANSWER. Building the Ikea store will destroy 80 to 100 jobs on the Erie Basin. Hundreds of other jobs in Red Hook will be imperiled by the streets' being clogged with traffic.
- Isn't it an open secret that big box stores like Ikea do not create retail jobs, they destroy jobs? ANSWER. Yes. In fact, there is a slight bump up in retail employment after a big box store opens, but within a year, the total number of employees goes down

to a figure lower than would have been anticipated given statewide economic growth. A big box store puts local stores out of business, and then it needs fewer employees to sell the same amount of goods.

- So does New York City need a big box store located near Red Hook Houses? ANSWER. No.

#### Questions for Ikea foes:

- How would Ikea affect the Brooklyn waterfront? ANSWER. With Ikea, the waterfront will turn into suburban sprawl, with more parking lots, highways, traffic, pollution, and big box stores, and fewer city uses on city blocks.
- What is the best use for the Red Hook waterfront? ANSWER. The City Planning Commission approved Red Hook's community-originated plan, in 1996. As Antonia Bryson, attorney for a Red Hook coalition, says, the plan seeks to improve the pedestrian environment, capitalize on Red Hook's historic resources and support maritime activity. The Baltimore firm of Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse has proposed a beautiful mixed-use project for Red Hook that emphasizes maritime, commercial and residential uses. It is an urban, not suburban, plan that will result in city growth in surrounding blocks and more jobs than Ikea.

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**I**N ORDER TO PROVIDE a few jobs for Red Hook Houses should New York allow a tax-subsidized big box store on the New York City waterfront? New Rochelle recently rejected Ikea, as did Somerville, Mass., and even nearby Gowanus.

The City Council will have 50 days to act. Tell the City Council that for Ikea to degrade the New York City waterfront is a nightmare.

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