



## **President's Message at 2019 Annual Meeting**

Good evening. For those who do not know me, I am Martha Bakos Dietz, the President of the Brooklyn Heights Association. I would like to welcome our elected officials, or their representatives, who have joined us tonight. But most of all, I welcome you, our members and neighbors, and thank you for being with us tonight.

### The BQE Reconstruction

My initial topic for these remarks is, of course, New York City DOT's plans for the reconstruction of the BQE. This project is certainly the most consequential development to affect this area for decades. It is so consequential that in the near future we will host a Town Hall dedicated solely to this issue. We've invited our elected officials and for that reason it is very important that the community turn out in large numbers. But, of course, I can't let tonight go by without addressing the BQE.

Last year, our Annual Meeting program was devoted to hearing from the Department of Transportation's Deputy Commissioner and Chief Bridge Officer, Robert Collyer, about that agency's plans for reconstructing the BQE. I told you then that the BHA had just the evening before testified at DOT's Scoping Hearing with respect to the Scoping Document DOT had presented to the community at that time. Since then, on September 27, DOT sprung on us its plan to build a six-lane, elevated highway at the level of the Brooklyn Heights Promenade for the duration of the BQE reconstruction. DOT told us all that this was its preferred plan for reconstructing the BQE. Needless to say, we were as appalled at this revelation as the rest of the community was.

We quickly set up a Task Force to address what we are calling the "Promenade Highway". Our Task Force's mission is to counter DOT's proposal, to cause DOT to withdraw the destructive Promenade Highway from consideration, and to assess how to better deal with the prospect of this major reconstruction project that

would inflict massive disruption on communities up and down the BQE corridor. Our Task Force is comprised of professionals in architecture, transportation, real estate, infrastructure financing, strategic communications, and law. They are all volunteers and I thank them for all the hours they have been putting into this work. We also invited A Better Way, another active neighborhood group with which we share goals, to join our Task Force.

We were fortunate to have in our midst a very talented architect and urban planner, Marc Wouters, with whom we have worked to develop an alternative concept to the DOT's Promenade Highway. We hired a transportation consultant and a transportation engineering firm to advise us on traffic demand management methods to reduce the volume of traffic on the BQE through out Brooklyn. We hired a strategic consulting firm and have retained the law firms of Arnold & Porter and Shearman & Sterling, the latter on a pro bono basis, to explore the legal issues surrounding the DOT plans. We have met with all our local elected officials – Council Member Steve Levin, Borough President Eric Adams, Comptroller Scott Stringer, City Council Speaker Corey Johnson, Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez, State Senator Brian Kavanaugh, Assembly Member Jo Anne Simon – and with Congressman Max Rose, this last official because restoring two-way tolling on the Verrazzano Bridge should be implemented to help reduce truck traffic on the BQE. Congestion pricing is also something that is finally getting serious attention, and we are looking for ways in which we can help our state elected officials pass relevant legislation. Back on November 19, we had a meeting with DOT at which Marc Wouters presented the alternative concept he developed for the BHA to Commissioner Polly Trottenberg and her staff and at which the Commissioner stated they would get back to us. Despite two formal written requests and numerous phone calls to DOT, we have heard nothing. We have met with our neighboring community associations to ascertain their concerns with respect to the project because it so clearly affects many neighborhoods throughout Brooklyn, not just ours. We have secured the support of several city, state, and national preservation groups who are rightfully concerned about a plan that will affect the historic Promenade and its beautiful gardens as well as the Brooklyn Bridge, another landmark.

What do we strive to accomplish through these efforts? First, we want the Promenade Highway, with all its negative environmental and traffic effects, taken

off the table. We want significant community input into a better alternative for a temporary bypass and into the ultimate design. We want better traffic management and more rational tolling implemented. And we want the City to take a broad, long-term view of the region's transportation needs and develop a 21st century solution rather than blindly rebuild a 20<sup>th</sup> century highway structure. Have we been at all successful? I would say yes. The entire community is engaged and is letting the City know that its current preferred plan is completely unacceptable. DOT has said that it is considering the Wouters/BHA concept among 3-5 others and has even recently mentioned congestion pricing and potentially using outer areas of Brooklyn Bridge Park. Most of our elected officials are supporting this community's efforts to get the Promenade Highway off the table and encourage the City to think outside the box. It appears that the DOT is at least beginning to listen.

How can you help? Please continue to write and call all our elected officials. The handout you received contains a sheet with all the relevant emails and telephone numbers. Please join the BHA as members and urge your friends and neighbors to do so; the more members we have, the more meaningful is our combined voice. Please contribute to our BQE Fund. We have raised almost \$180,000 and of course we have some resources of our own that we can spend but our costs so far are at approximately \$50,000 and we have already incurred contractual obligations of approximately another \$85,000. Although we are so grateful to the law firm of Shearman & Sterling for representing us pro bono, we need to pay for experts in many different technical fields – highway engineering, traffic management, air quality, noise management, historic preservation. Such experts, of course, do not come cheap. Finally, please attend our upcoming Town Hall. That meeting will be devoted exclusively to the BQE Reconstruction and we will give you more details and updates. Several of our elected officials have committed to attending. A large audience at that meeting will make it clear to City Hall and DOT that we mean business and will assure our elected officials that they are right to side with us in opposing the Promenade Highway.

#### Rikers Island Plan and the Brooklyn Detention Center:

Although the BQE Reconstruction is taking up a great deal of time, we still are addressing other matters of concern to the community. In February 2018, Mayor

de Blasio announced his Administration's plan to close Rikers Island and to transfer its detainees to new, safer, better designed, and more humane jails near courthouses in every borough except Staten Island.

The four boroughs would each have a jail with a capacity of 1,510 beds. The new jail at the corner of Atlantic Avenue and Boerum Place, the current site of the Brooklyn House of Detention, would be 1.4 million square feet and up to 430 feet in height (excluding rooftop mechanicals and elevator bulkheads). At a Floor Area Ratio of 20, it would be the largest building in Downtown Brooklyn, and nearly twice the height of the Brooklyn Law School dorm, the tallest building nearby.

The BHA, as part of a coalition of other stakeholders in the area – including the Cobble Hill Association, Boerum Hill Association, and residential buildings near the site - agrees that there is a moral necessity to close Rikers Island, implement robust criminal justice reform, and replace the current Brooklyn House of Detention with a modern jail that would provide to those incarcerated within it a mix of supportive services.

Thus, the BHA, in concert with the coalition, has challenged important aspects of the Mayor's plan and in particular the process by which that plan was developed:

- First, there has been a complete lack of any meaningful engagement with the affected community; the only meeting with the local Brooklyn community took place just one week before the release of the relevant scoping documents, which solidified the plan's elements.
- Second, in spite of this lack of meaningful engagement, the Administration is in a rush to start the land use review process next month.
- Third, the size of the proposed new jail with respect to the surrounding community is wholly out-of-context. It is far too large and imposes unacceptable environmental impacts on our nearby communities.
- Finally, there is no new jail proposed on Staten Island, as the City's plan envisions Staten Island detainees being incarcerated in the Brooklyn facility.

We have called for a delay in the start of ULURP to enable the community to have real input into the City's plan for a borough-based jail system. We have pressed the City to identify a second jail site within Brooklyn to hold persons who do not need to be close to the court system. And, given that up to 40% of the City's jail population has some form of mental illness, we have advocated for alternatives to

incarceration for this population and for facilities designed to address their mental health needs.

The City belatedly established a Neighborhood Advisory Council (NAC) and at the December 2018 NAC meeting, the coalition made a presentation that advocated, most importantly, that any new jail in Brooklyn:

- Fit the scale and context of the neighborhood;
- Be no taller than the tallest nearby building (219 feet); and
- Have an FAR between 8-10, which would be 33% to 66% larger than the current jail, but half the size of the proposed jail.

Despite several months of meetings, the City has made no real progress toward addressing the coalition's concerns.

#### BQX Project:

A third project to which we are devoting our time is the BQX. Two years ago, the BHA sponsored a panel discussion at its Annual Meeting on the City's proposed BQX Streetcar project. The panel was composed of transit advocates, a critic of the City's development policies that foster gentrification, and transportation engineers. The panel raised significant questions about the project's feasibility on a number of grounds: reliability, efficiency, equity, and a cost-benefit analysis.

The City projected that the project's bonds issued for its construction would be repaid through increased property tax revenue, i.e., tax increment financing on nearby properties. But as the project's estimated costs have increased, the de Blasio Administration has conceded that the BQX cannot be built without considerable Federal funding. Due to rising costs, the City recently eliminated the southern-most segment of the project in Sunset Park.

For the last year, rumors abounded that the BQX was dead. These rumors reflected the need for federal funding, the delay in moving forward with key studies, and the departure of the project's director. Yet when the Amazon HQ deal was first announced, BQX advocates touted the virtues of the streetcar line

as a means to serve the site, and the project took on new life. A few weeks ago, the City committed \$7 M to fund an environmental assessment of the project.

The turnaround by Amazon has again introduced new uncertainty into the project's fate. The prospect of significant federal funding, or any federal funding, is highly questionable. Moreover, if the City does move forward with the BQX construction, it would occur at the same time that the City intends to rebuild the BQE, which would only add to the tremendous traffic congestion in areas near the BQE.

The future of the BQX remains uncertain but we will continue to monitor its status and its effect on this community.

#### Other Newsworthy Items:

And rest assured that the BHA has not forgotten all the quality of life issues important to this neighborhood. We took several initiatives this past year on such issues.

- First, we ensured the repaving of Love Lane and College Place, streets which the City maintained for a very long time were not actual roads for which it had any responsibility.
- Second, BHA applied for LPC permits on behalf of homeowners on Garden Place for tree pit enlargement, found the contractor, and paid for a portion of the costs. We hope to expand this effort to other streets in Brooklyn Heights.
- Finally, our Landmarks Committee continues to review every Certificate of Appropriateness application for buildings within Brooklyn Heights, to meet with the projects' architects, and to testify at the LPC hearings. The BHA has recently reviewed 183 Remsen Street and 200 Montague Street, two of the most significant projects facing the neighborhood, significant because both are in the Borough Hall Skyscraper Historic District and both have owners who want to make major alterations.

I thank you for attending and for hearing me out tonight.