

BHA ANNUAL MEETING MINUTES

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2020

Saint Francis College

Founders Hall

180 Remsen Street

The Annual Meeting of the Brooklyn Heights Association was held on February 26, 2020 at 7:00 PM in St. Francis College in Brooklyn Heights. President Martha Dietz called the meeting to order.

WELCOME

Martha welcomed community members and guests to the 2020 Annual Meeting, recognized local elected officials and their representatives for their continuing efforts on behalf of the community, and reviewed the order of the meeting.

BHA BUSINESS

Minutes of the 2019 Annual Meeting:

Reading of the minutes of last year's meeting was waived. Copies were available at the entrance to Founders Hall.

Financial Report:

BHA Executive Director Lara Birnback August 31, 2019. She reported a loss of roughly \$(45,000) on support and revenue of over \$890,000 in 2019. This compares to a profit of \$152,000 on gross revenues of roughly \$648,000 reported in 2018. Support and revenue figures in both years included the generous contribution of pro bono legal services for various BHA projects. The key driver of the loss in 2019 related to considerable efforts devoted to the City's BQE repair and redevelopment plans. Total costs incurred on this effort in 2019 approximated \$635,000.

During 2019 the BHA also incurred start-up costs associated with the second Designer Show House event of roughly \$42,000. Cumulatively however, the event produced a net benefit of over \$80,000 to the BHA. The BHA ended the fiscal year with \$421,000 in cash reserves, which provides the organization with flexibility moving forward.

President's Report:

BHA President Martha Bakos Dietz spoke of the BHA's accomplishments during the previous year including the elimination of the city Department of Transportation's plan to demolish the Brooklyn Heights Promenade and replace it with a temporary six lane highway. Both the expert panel appointed by Mayor de Blasio and the City Council have now rejected that plan. Ms. Bakos Dietz said, there is work to be done and the BHA has joined with [A Better Way NYC](#) and the [Cobble Hill Association](#) to form the [Coalition for the BQE Transformation](#) which, in conjunction with other affected community groups, will strive to assure a plan for the future of the BQE that respects the needs of these communities and realistically reflects future transportation needs.

The planned eight-month closure of the Clark Street subway station to replace its three decrepit elevators is slated to begin sometime in 2021. The Transit Authority has given assurances that it will take steps to help the merchants whose shops line the arcade outside the turnstiles by putting up signs that inform the public that the arcade, and the shops, are open during the construction.

Ms. Bakos Dietz said the existing Brooklyn House of Detention is now closed and will be demolished. Its replacement, scheduled to be completed in 2026, will, thanks to advocacy by the BHA and other community groups, be much lower in height than the City's original plan. The BHA will continue to stay involved in monitoring this issue.

The City Parks Department will provide twenty rat-proof trash receptacles and increase extermination efforts because of rat problems on the Promenade. Finally, Ms. Bakos Dietz said there is a six-month moratorium in effect on film shoots in the North Heights; when it expires a six-month moratorium for the South Heights will become effective.

Community Service Awards:

Tom Stewart presented this year's BHA Community Service Awards. This year's awards were presented to:

- **Marc Wouters** for his work with the BHA in designing alternative routes for the BQE during the period of repair.
- **The Promenade Gardens Mapping Project** to map the locations of plantings in the Promenade Gardens. The map will be a useful resource should BQE work cause damage to the Gardens.

Commercial Vacancy Panel Discussion

Topic: Empty Storefronts and our Commercial Corridors: How Can We Help Local Businesses Survive and Thrive?

Panel Moderator — Eliza Shapiro, New York Times

Panelists:

- Nur Asri, Senior Research Strategist, Streetsense
- Deborah Marton, Executive Director, Van Alen Institute
- Randy Peers, President & CEO, Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce

The panelists didn't think there was any primary cause of the proliferation of vacant commercial properties, or any single or easy solution. High rents have been an important contributing factor, but they have recently been declining. On-line shopping has disrupted retail for items like clothing, and even groceries, but it hasn't affected the demand for restaurants or for services like barber shops and hair stylists, nail salons, and urgent care facilities. Some traditional stores survive because they provide good value and service, and because of a loyal customer base.

In some neighborhoods, like Williamsburg, new construction has increased the supply of available commercial space while in others, like Brownsville, spaces that become vacant find few takers. High property taxes, regulations and bureaucratic inefficiency, an example being the long waiting time for liquor licenses, are an impediment to new business formations. The panelists were unenthusiastic about the efficacy, or desirability, of a "vacancy tax." During the Q&A, an audience member noted that an owner of a vacant property could, assuming they had another property or properties generating income, get a tax write off for the vacant property. One panelist suggested that property owners should be encouraged to allow temporary "pop-up" users of vacant spaces. Perhaps most important was the advice to be loyal to any local business that you love.