

GWAPP

Position Paper No. 2

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A Brief History of Greenpoint/Williamsburg: How Clean Point Energy, LLC Seeks to Reindustrialize a Residential/Commercial Community¹

Preliminary Statement

This position paper presents a brief history of the Greenpoint/Williamsburg community from its founding by Dutch settlers to the present. The Greenpoint/Williamsburg area was originally developed as a farming community. In the 19th century, it became a center for industrial trades including shipbuilding, foundries, warehousing, bulk storage, oil refining and light manufacturing of sugar, glass, ceramics and rope. Since the Second World War, the area has seen a steady decline in industrial use with many former sites becoming abandoned and dilapidated, leaving behind primarily waste treatment and transfer facilities. These heavy uses have been sited in areas along the Newtown Creek or south of the former Brooklyn Eastern District Terminal (“BEDT”). More recently, the City’s critical housing shortage has spurred thousand of young professionals,

¹The Policy & Planning Group of Greenpoint Waterfront Association for Parks & Planning (“GWAPP”) is issuing this policy paper as part of a series to express the community’s studied opposition to the Clean Point Energy, LLC’s proposal to develop a power plant at the Bayside site. This paper is based upon the following sources: Greenpoint-Williamsburg: An Industrial Study (New York City Department of City Planning 1987); William Felner, Historic Green Point (Greenpoint Savings Bank 1918); Kenneth T. Jackson, The Encyclopedia of New York City (Yale University 1995); George Kranzler, Williamsburg: A Jewish Community in Transition (Phillip Feldheim 1961); Marcia Reiss, Greenpoint Neighborhood History Guide (Brooklyn Historical Society 2001); Henry Stiles, The Civil, Political, Professional, and Ecclesiastical History of the County of Kings and the City of Brooklyn, 1683-1884 (W.W. Munsell 1884); Tom Gilbert “Greetings from Greenpoint” (Brooklyn Bridge Magazine, Sept.-Oct. 1999); and Toby Sanchez, “The Williamsburg Neighborhood Profile” (Brooklyn in Touch Information Center 1990).

families and artists to convert many of area's old industrial properties into commercial and residential structures. In the process, the neighborhood has become one of the premier communities in New York City. This position paper concludes the Bayside site is inappropriate for a power plant because it is environmentally incompatible with the State/New York University Park at the BEDT site and open space and residential development at the Bushwick Inlet, U.S.S. Monitor site, the Greenpoint Terminal Market, and other residences, churches and schools in the area.

Early History

The neighborhood of Greenpoint/Williamsburg (1990 pop. approx. 140,655)² is located in northwestern Brooklyn along the East River waterfront. The area is bounded to the north and east by the Newtown Creek, to the south by Flushing Avenue, and to the west by the East River. The area was originally bought by the Dutch in 1638 from the Keshaechqueren Indians and named for the grassy expanse that extended into the East River. By the early nineteenth century it was a farming area sparsely populated by the descendants of the original Dutch settlers. According to legend, one farm between North 1st Street and South 7th was a favorite boarding place for Captain Kidd.

19th Century Industrial Growth

In 1832, the region was surveyed into lots and in 1838 a turnpike connected the community with Astoria to the north. The Greenpoint/ Williamsburg area was incorporated into the City of Brooklyn in 1855. It soon became a site for docks, shipyards, distilleries, taverns, mills and foundries (mostly sited away from

²2000 census figures show a growth rate for Greenpoint/ Williamsburg of approximately twenty percent. See "City Population Tops 8 Million For First Time", N.Y.Times, March 15, 2001, p1.

the waterfront itself) which supported printing, pottery, glassmaking, petroleum refining, and iron making. The leading ship building firms included the Continental Iron Works, which built the ironclad Monitor that fought in the Civil War. This shipyard sat directly across from the Bayside site and is being registered as a National Historic Site to become the final resting place of U.S.S. Monitor's remains.

Charles Pratt also established his shipbuilding works in the area and opened the Astral Oil Company on the Newtown Creek, which he merged with Standard Oil in 1874. In addition, some of the largest industrial firms in the nation were started in this area, including Pfizer Pharmaceutical Corporation (1849); Brooklyn Flint Glass (later Corning Glassware); and the Havemeyers and Elder Sugar Refinery in Williamsburg (later Amstar and then Domino), once the largest establishment of its kind in the world. It is important to highlight that these major industrial facilities were seldom sited directly along the East River. Many were situated inland or along tributaries such as the Newtown Creek.

Most of the regional population was Dutch, English, and Irish until the mid-1880s, when immigrants from Poland, Russia, and later Italy settled into the area to work in the factories and warehouses lining Kent Avenue, West Street, and the Newtown Creek. According to tradition, the neighborhood is the origin of the dialect known as Brooklynese. After the opening of the Williamsburg Bridge in 1903 thousands of poor and working-class Jews from Eastern Europe moved into southern part of the neighborhood from the Lower East Side.

To provide workers with decent housing, Pratt built the Astral Apartments on Franklin Street between Java and India in 1886. Other surrounding streets, such as Kent, Milton, and Noble contained rows of brick townhouses and wood frame homes that are still well maintained as a registered historic district. The homes were built by managers from the local shipbuilding and other manufacturing enterprises and were the birth place of Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans

Hughes and Mae West. The Bayside site sits a mere two blocks from the historic district.

The 20th Century & the Decline of Industry

During the first half of the twentieth century shipbuilding, light manufacturing and warehousing gradually diminished, and the active factory life of Greenpoint/ Williamsburg largely ended after the Second World War. This process was spurred, in part, by the bankruptcy of many business in the 1930s and the exodus of the area's more prosperous citizens.

After World War II there was a marked increase in the number of Puerto Ricans as well as Polish immigrants who fled communism and made the neighborhood the center of the City's Polish community and accounted for about half the immigrants that settled there in the mid 1980s. In fact, the area became such a center of Polish-American life that His Holiness Pope John Paul II came to Greenpoint in 1969 while he was still the Cardinal of Krakow, and Lech Walesa visited Greenpoint's sizable Polish population in 1991.

There was also continued growth in the Jewish community as a large number moved into the area fleeing Nazism. These Jews formed Hasidic synagogues and schools. There are more than twenty sects from different parts of Europe, including the Satmar sect from Hungary and Poland. There are also many of the other recent immigrants from Mexico, Guyana, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Ecuador, China and Pakistan.

In 1957, scores of buildings were demolished making way for the Brooklyn Queens Expressway, which bisected the neighborhood and destroyed more than 2,200 housing units. Further economic depression and neglect left blocks of abandoned buildings, factories, and warehouses.

Since that time, industrial development in Greenpoint has occurred along the area of the Newtown Creek. This is the location of the largest sewage treatment plant in the Northeast, one of Brooklyn's three municipal marine transfer stations, as well as almost half of the commercial waste transfer stations in New York City. These facilities handle thousands of tons per day of the City's commercial and residential garbage.

Recent Commercial & Residential Growth

Over the past two decades, the community has witnessed an enormous influx of thousands of young professionals and artists who have left Manhattan to settle in this area. These individuals have reclaimed many formerly abandoned structures, converting them into housing, loft spaces and commercial enterprises. As a result, the area has seen the opening of numerous Internet companies, restaurants, cafes, art galleries and other businesses. The median income, rents, and property values have risen considerably as the area has become one of the premier developing neighborhoods in New York City. As part of this process, the City Planning Commission has brought legislation to permit buildings adjacent to the Bayside site to become legal residences.

Also, in recent years, Greenpoint/Williamsburg has become a favorite backdrop for the film and television industries. Some of the recent feature films produced in part on section of waterfront include "The Siege" starring Oscar winners Denzel Washington and Annette Benning, "A Perfect Murder" starring Michael Douglas and Gwyneth Paltrow, "8mm" starring Nicholas Cage, "Sleepers" starring Robert DeNiro and "Romeo is Bleeding" starring Gary Oldman and Lena Olin. Moreover, the community has also become a center for digital post-production and editing.

The main commercial district lies along Manhattan Avenue and runs through McCarren Park to Bedford Avenue. The area has numerous restaurants,

shops, bakeries, bookstores, galleries and other establishments. Significantly, the proposed Bayside project is within two block of the Greenpoint Historic District with its many houses of worship: Saint Anthony and Alphonsus; St. John's Lutheran, the First Baptist Church of Brooklyn, the Holy Family Church, the Reformed Church of Greenpoint, Congregation Ahavas Israel, St. Elias and the Church of Ascension. Each of these institutions have been in continuous operation for over one hundred years. The site also impacts the the Church of the Transfiguration (Russian Orthodox), a national historic landmark dominated by its large onion shaped cupolas, which sits directly down the street from the Bayside site at North 12th Street and Driggs Avenue. In addition, the community also houses St. Stanislaus Kostka on Humbolt Street, which represents one of the largest Polish-Catholic populations in the United States.

The Borough of Brooklyn has the least amount of park space per capita in the entire State. In addition, the Greenpoint/Williamsburg community is most under served area in Brooklyn for park facilities. McCarren Park, the area's regional park, is a mere two blocks from the site on the former tributary of Bushwick Creek between Berry and Leonard Streets; Monsignor McGoldrick Park is on Nassau Avenue and contains a monument to the designer of the Monitor.

Public access to the East River waterfront currently occurs at only one location, a small park area on Grand Street. A fraction of an acre in size, it is woefully inadequate for a community of over 140,000. Furthermore, a 44MW NYPA generator is being constructed directly next to this park. Indeed, in an unfortunate incident, construction took down storage tanks that the NYPA Environmental Assessment planned to retain as a buffer between this generator and the only existing waterfront park in North Brooklyn.

The State and New York University announced last year that they will build a new park and athletic facility in conjunction on the former BEDT site. The

proposed Bayside plant would be two blocks from this new facility. In addition, immediately to the north of the Bayside site lies open space at the Bushwick Inlet, the U.S.S. Monitor site and residential development at the Greenpoint Terminal Market. As a result, the proposed Bayside project is environmentally incompatible with the surrounding area.

Conclusion

The Greenpoint/Williamsburg community has its roots in the original agrarian settlement of New York City. The 19th century witnessed the conversion of this area into industrial uses along the East River and the Newtown Creek, both of which flourished with the growth of the United States. Since the dawn of the 20th century, the local industrial base has steadily declined. In its place, the community has experienced unparalleled commercial and residential growth that is fully expected to continue with the City's pressing need for more housing. While Greenpoint/Williamsburg retains industrial facilities, these operations are located along the Newtown Creek and south of the BEDT site. The proposed Bayside power plant seeks to entrench heavy industry on a part of the waterfront that is no longer compatible for such use.