

Brooklyn Daily Eagle

Volume 49, No. 225, MONDAY, MARCH 1, 2004 E-mail: edit@brooklyneagle.com

& DAILY BULLETIN

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Ending the Housing Crisis in Brooklyn

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BROOKLYN — The Brooklyn Historical Society recently celebrated its reopening, welcoming the public back to its glorious home with an exhibit chronicling the four-century history of "Making a Living in Brooklyn." But visitors to the exhibit know that the real challenge of the 21st century is "Finding a Home in Brooklyn."

Brooklyn has never been hotter. The Cyclones are the hottest ticket in baseball since the Dodgers left town; Brooklyn Heights, Park Slope and Cobble Hill are some of the most desirable neighborhoods in New York; Williamsburg has become the standard by which hipness is judged; and even Red Hook has come back to life, with prices increasing dramatically. But this vibrancy is undermined by a severe shortage of affordable housing that threatens to destroy the economic and social diversity of Brooklyn's unique neighborhoods.

Everyone agrees that New York City must increase its housing supply — especially its supply of housing affordable to working, low and middle income families. The signs of the city's housing crisis are undeniable. Between 1990 and 2000, the official population of New York City grew by 686,000, but only 81,000 new housing units were built. Faced with this shortfall, families have turned to housing of last resort. According to a recent study by the Citizens Housing and

Planning Council, more than 150,000 illegal and unregulated apartments were built in New York City from 1990 and 2000. More than 25,000 families now live doubled up, in overcrowded and often unsanitary conditions.

And far too many families do not have a home at all. More than 38,000 people in New York City are homeless and spend the night in shelters. This includes 8,200 families with almost 17,000 children. Why should the least fortunate and most vulnerable

New Yorkers — our children, the elderly, the disabled and the very poor — continue to live in squalor or have no home at all in New York City, the most famous city in the world?

Brooklyn has been hit especially hard. The most populous county in the state of New York, Brooklyn is home to 2.5 million people in 860,000 homes. This represents an increase of more than 160,000 people — 7.2 percent — since 1990. Unfortunately, housing construction has not kept pace with population growth, driving up rents throughout the borough. A quarter of all Brooklyn residents pay more than 50 percent of their income for rent and utilities, when 30 percent is considered the limit for affordability. For Brooklyn to continue its economic and social momentum, the housing crisis must be addressed.

One year ago, Mayor Bloomberg announced the most significant housing initiative for New York City since the 1980s. The mayor's "New Housing Marketplace" plan provides a cru-

cial first step to address the city's critical lack of affordable housing. Innovative financing will produce a \$3 billion investment over five years to create and preserve 65,000 units of affordable housing. The challenge will be to move forward with the mayor's initiative and also to lay the groundwork for more affordable housing development that will solve the city's housing problem. Most experts agree that New York needs at least 200,000 more housing units over the next 10 years, and market rate housing will not fill the needs of many New Yorkers.

As the city's economic and budget situation improve, we must expand the scope of the mayor's initiative to reach the goals of the Housing First! plan. Housing First! — an unprecedented coalition of community, business, civic, labor and religious organizations — has called for a 10-year, \$10 billion commitment to build and preserve more than 185,000 homes. More than 200 organizations have united behind this goal. The coalition is remarkably diverse, a testament to the severity and the breadth of the housing crisis.

The challenge of housing in a vibrant, growing city is formidable, but so are our resources. The borough of Brooklyn and New York City as a whole contains a wealth of expertise to build new homes — neighborhood-based community development corporations, government agencies and private developers. Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz has made affordable housing one of his top priorities. He created a Brooklyn Hous-

ing Development Fund to spur the creation of affordable housing in Brooklyn, and he has already helped to create hundreds of affordable units for Brooklyn residents by working with developers, housing experts and community board members. Most recently, Markowitz has worked hard to ensure that the plans for the proposed basketball arena complex at Flatbush and Atlantic Avenues include a substantial number of affordable units.

The people of Brooklyn care about affordable housing, and public officials are beginning to take notice. According to a recent survey by the National Association of Realtors, 76 percent of New Yorkers say affordable housing is an important issue for them when they vote on Election Day. A sustained and comprehensive effort by New York City's people and public officials is essential to ensuring that everyone in Brooklyn and all New Yorkers have a simple, decent, affordable place to call home.

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Point
Of View