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Community

Oak Point jail opponents gear up for next hearing

By Jennifer Taylor

A public hearing March 5 will mark the next phase of a showdown between city officials looking to build a 2,000-bed jail in Hunts Point and community groups who have passionately opposed the project since last spring.

Debate erupted in April, when Department of Corrections plans to erect a \$375 million jail on the 28-acre former Oak Point Rail Yard first became public. The proposal is part of the department's Borough Jails Plan, which would also re-open and expand the Brooklyn House of Detention and close parts of Rikers Island. Officials say this restructuring would increase efficiency and convenience in city detention centers.

"No one knows better than the families of our inmates how difficult it is to get to Rikers Island for a visit," said Commissioner Martin Horn, in a statement on the department's Web site. The department contends that a jail within the borough would help inmates stay connected to their families and take advantage of local community organizations' re-entry services.

A diverse coalition of 19 community groups formed Community in Unity last year to voice their worries about the project, and demand a say in Oak Point development. Members include Sustainable South Bronx and Green Worker Cooperatives, environmental groups that would rather have a recycling plant built on the site, and advocacy groups such as Rights for Imprisoned People with Psychiatric Disabilities, who argue that city money would be better spent on preventive programs and services. The organizations have challenged many of the justifications for building the new jail.

"The site is more accessible by boat and rail than public transportation, in an industrial area near hazardous materials, and just three-quarters of a mile from Rikers," said Maggie Williams, a lawyer with The Bronx Defenders, which provides free criminal defense services. "And most importantly, why are we building a jail when crime in the city has been on the decline for years?"

To Pilar Maschi, 36, the anti-jail struggle is also a personal fight for representation for former inmates. An activist with Critical Resistance, a coalition organization that fights prison expansion, Maschi said she never got the tools to fight her heroin addiction during multiple prison terms in Rikers. In 2000, six years after her first conviction, she finally got effective treatment at La Casita, a South Bronx in-patient drug program for women with children.

"I know jails don't work, and those who know that have to be heard," said Maschi, who now lives in the South Bronx with her 6-year-old daughter. "There's no way the community would support this plan, but the Department of Corrections didn't ask before, and they're not listening now."

Some have come out in favor of the jail, including Queens Councilman Peter Vallone Jr., and the Fortune Society, a Bronx-based, city-funded provider of inmate services. But Community in Unity's more vocal campaign includes an online petition and public protests, and support from Borough President Adolfo Carrión Jr., Assemblyman Ruben Diaz, Jr. and South Bronx Rep. José Serrano.

"We will work to convince City Hall and the Police Department that instead of building a jail in the Bronx at Oak Point, we should build a police academy here," said Carrión in his State of the Borough address.

In the meantime, the city's Economic Development Corporation is negotiating the land purchase, and beginning the city's Uniform Land Use Review Process required for project approval. An Environmental Scope Hearing is scheduled for March 5, but officials claim the jail is far from a done deal.

"Ultimately, approval relies on elected officials, and they've made it clear that they're going to listen to constituent opinions," explained Venetia Lannon, a vice president at the Economic Development Corporation. "It all depends on how compelling the arguments are on either side."

But to Maschi, there is no question how the struggle will end.

"We're going to battle until we stop the jail," she said. "Our motto is: no jail, no compromise."

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