

Holding Court

Community Board 4 residents get an earful of plans for a new courthouse downtown

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PHOTO: LENORE SCHULTZ

Representatives from the Dormitory Authority of the State of New York (DASNY) and Bovis Lend Lease, the firms serving as financier and construction manager, respectively, for the \$325M construction of the new Criminal Court Complex on 161st Street in the Bronx, came under fire from concerned community members at the November 28 meeting of Community Board 4, which was held at the Bronx Museum of the Arts at 1040 Grand Concourse.

In a move meant to inform those who are to be directly affected by the slated four year construction project set to run from January 15, 2001 to March 5, 2005, the Board's usual meeting location was changed from their office at 1650 Selwyn Avenue to the museum, in order to accommodate the area merchants and community members who were specially invited.

"This project has been in the works for about ten years now and is just coming to fruition," stated Margaret Hunt-Tejada, District Manager for Board 4. She also added that the expansion grew out of the need for more courtroom space. The new courthouse will be one of the largest in the state and among the largest in the entire United States. This project arises from a 13 year old state law that requires the city to evaluate its courthouses and repair or expand them, as they deem necessary. The new court complex will work with the existing Supreme and Criminal/Family courts located near the site to create a Municipal Center as planned in the guidelines of the Department of City Planning.

John Andreus, Chief Project Manager from the Dormitory Authority, and Gordon Althoff, Senior Project Manager from Bovis Lend Lease, were at the meeting to give a presentation of the overview and the site logistics plan of the pending construction. An artist's rendering of the finished product was exhibited and a layout of the planned traffic changes was also displayed.

According to Andreus, the new facilities will occupy two city blocks from 161st to 162nd streets, and Morris Avenue to Sherman Avenue. The building will be ten stories tall, containing 47 courtrooms, and two stories of underground parking with accommodations for 240 cars. These spaces will only be available for court related use, however, and not for area residents. The structure will feature a glass façade, a large open-air courtyard, and a round structure at one end of the courtyard that will serve as a jury assembly area. It will also have bullet resistant glass and blast resistant walls. Some of the courtrooms will contain flat screen monitors, in addition to other video conferencing equipment that will enable testimony by defendants and witnesses from outside the courthouse.

Althoff, who promises to be full time on the construction site for any residents who have concerns they need addressed, added that the facility will consist of a million square feet of space, 5500 tons of steel, and will descend 35 feet into the ground, requiring excavation of up to 40 feet and the removal of over 100,000 cubic yards of dirt.

In order to keep the site safe, a plan has been filed with the Department of

Transportation (DOT) to close one parking lane around the entire fenced-in site, while also allowing for two moving lanes to be open in each direction at all times. Sherman Avenue, currently going southbound one-way, will be changed to northbound for two blocks, between 161st and 163rd Streets. Between 161st and 162nd Streets, there will be no parking allowed in order to maintain an 11 foot emergency fire lane. There will be authorized parking only allowed between 162nd and 163rd Streets. Furthermore, 162nd Street will be demapped between Grant and Morris Avenues, and Grant Avenue between 161st and 162nd Streets will also no longer exist. Finally, 163rd Street, between Grant and Morris Avenues, now going one-way westbound, will be changed to one-way eastbound.

These plans drew the ire of many in attendance that have already complained of severe congestion and almost non-existent parking in the vicinity. Victor M. Rios, who has lived in the community for 20 years, had to give up his car because of the problem with the present parking situation. Currently, 161st Street is filled with no parking and no standing zones, yet vehicles bearing municipal and state parking stickers park on a daily basis in bus stops, in crosswalks, and on sidewalks. Oftentimes, vehicles are double and triple parked along the streets in the area. "Right now it's very difficult to maneuver around 161st Street, and this is the current problem," said Rios. "What you're asking to do is something that's very hard to maintain. It is unsafe for

people to even walk there. Now, you're asking that we put another obstacle in the area?"

Althoff conceded that enforcement was critical, but unable to offer solid solutions, turned these questions over to DOT representative, Harby Woods, from the Office of Construction, Mitigation, and Coordination. However, when pressed, Woods admitted that he would have to set up a meeting between his boss and the Board to further finalize any solutions to the problem. He also claimed not to have knowledge of other construction projects set to start concurrently with the Court Complex construction, which could further cause larger traffic snafus in the area. "Traffic is a major issue and I'm sure most people here are concerned about it," said Board Chairman Ade A. Rasul. "We'll wait to get his boss in here to get the answers we need," he added. "The Bronx has very limited east-west routes," said Frank Zimmerman, from the Borough President's office. "149th and 161st Streets are the only two in the area. Both streets, independent of this project, are going into construction at the same time." Compounding the problem, work is also slated to be performed on the Grand Concourse at 161st Street, on the tunnel at 161st Street that runs under the Grand Concourse, and the building of the 153rd Street bridge. Construction is already underway on the Macombs Dam Bridge at the 155th Street exit off the Major Deegan Expressway.

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