



The proposed path of the Brooklyn Greenway Initiative would span 14 miles of waterfront and transverse many varied neighborhoods.

All images courtesy Brooklyn Greenway Initiative



This future vision of Flushing Avenue would rejuvenate this section of Brooklyn with its bikepaths and pedestrian areas.

## URBAN JOURNAL

### Greenscaping Brooklyn's Waterfront

An ambitious project could create landscaped spaces that would enable travel along the area's currently inaccessible 14 mile-long waterfront.

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For New York, Brooklyn's waterfront is an unmined treasure. Dappled with decaying brick buildings and cobble-stoned streets, the shores are relics of the city's maritime past. And the breathtaking view of Manhattan wallpapered behind the Hudson Bay is an urban portrait rarely seen by its dwellers. So it's little surprise that the underutilized shoreline, once a major economic engine for New York City that winnowed into decline after World War II, is eyed with much optimism from developers. As the city begins to rezone the waterfront for private use, there is much talk of booming business and high-rise luxury apartment buildings from Red Hook to Williamsburg.

The communities of Brooklyn, however, are fighting to have a say in its development. The diverse neighborhoods have united to transform their waterfront into a 14-mile greenway. Once completed, the Brooklyn Greenway will be the biggest public access park since Central Park was formed in 1853. "I'd venture to say that it is one of the quality of life amenities for this generation," says Brian McCormick, who helped spearhead the movement by forming the Brooklyn Greenway Initiative in 1998. "Brooklyn has the lowest per capita of space in the city. People don't have opportunities to relive stress or to exercise. We're creating one of the greatest opportunities to do that."

Once implemented, the Brooklyn Greenway will span from Sunset Park to Greenpoint and will accommodate a 7-foot bike lane, a 10-foot pedestrian path and six feet of landscaping. McCormick and his partner, Milton Puryear, have been working with public agencies, advocacy groups and the waterfront community boards in Brooklyn for the past eight years out of their homes and their own pockets to secure land and funding.

With the help of Rep. Nydia Velazquez (D-Sunset Park), the Brooklyn Greenway Initiative acquired \$18.25 million in federal transportation funds this past March. Sunset Park will receive \$10 million to go towards a 22-acre park in Sunset Park, and the remaining \$8.25 million will be designated towards Red Hook, Greenpoint, and areas around the Navy Yard. Funding for the rest of the project will be acquired and implemented gradually. "The greenway is going to happen," insists Puryear, whose finance background and Harvard business degree have been pivotal to the Greenway's fundraising success. "The question is--how is it going to happen? It will come in bits and pieces."

In Brooklyn's borough of 2.5 million people, which hosts the city's melting pot of working-class residents and emigrants who can't afford Manhattan's rent, the idea of open space is a mixed blessing. Twenty-five percent of Brooklynites live below the poverty line, and health problems such as diabetes and obesity are prevailing issues.



Bikepaths along Navy Street could bring renewed interest to the largely dilapidated area of the historic Brooklyn Navy Yards.

"The design of cities has something to do with the health of the people," Puryear says. "Problems are often influenced by design." However, while creating more open space for recreation and exercise could address some of these quality of life concerns, it might also raise the value in real estate, forcing out its lower-income residents.

In areas such as Sunset Park, which has less than a quarter of an acre of open space for every 1,000 people, the residents are confronted with this dilemma. "While we are fighting for open space, what we've learned in the last few years is that when you engage in environmental remediation or an effort to clean up or green your community, you have to leave," says Elizabeth Yeampierre, executive director of UPROSE, a social and environmental justice advocacy group in Sunset Park.

Sunset Park is one of the first communities in Brooklyn to receive funding for the Greenway Project. Home to more than 120,000 people, its diverse inhabitants come from all over including the Caribbean, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Mexico, Asia, and the Middle-East. Working alongside the Brooklyn Greenway Initiative, Yeampierre has brought together the area's diverse community to voice their vision for the greenway, and plans are being made for its design and implementation.



The Carroll Gardens neighborhood would benefit from open access to the nearby waterfront.

"The Greenway has brought everyone together," Yeampierre states. "People who have often been marginalized or excluded from decision making will feel like they have been responsible for transforming their landscape." In attempts to embrace the diversity of the neighborhoods, some ideas discussed for the greenway include a place where people can walk and spend some passive recreation, as well as areas for Tai Chi and the selling of Mexican arts and crafts.

Sunset Park is also one of the largest walk-to-work neighborhoods in New York City, so UPROSE is partnering with the waterfront industries to incorporate greenways into their developments. Making sure that businesses stay put is important. "You have to strike a balance between the environmental health of a community and their economical needs," Yeampierre explains.

The Brooklyn Bridge Park venture is a glimpse into such a balance. Last January, state officials approved plans for an 85-acre park on the Brooklyn waterfront that will develop underused shoreline into a park whose plan will include luxury housing and hotel rooms. The Greenway is factored into their design and will run through the 1.3 mile stretch of park.

Part of the park has already been developed and the effect on the local community is considerable. Nearby residents say they've developed more of an appreciation for Brooklyn's iconography, and make more of an effort to go outside. And with breathtaking views of Manhattan and the Brooklyn Bridge, the park is now a popular destination for New Yorkers desperate for an escape. "Having the park-like amenities, the green space, allows you to remove yourself from this artificial grid that we're on," McCormick says. "It provides relief from the hard edges of the urban life."

The design for the Greenway itself is still being planned, but Puryear envisions trees, shrubberies, and elements of design from different neighborhoods in Brooklyn. For Puryear, whose desire for more open space began after he bought a bike for his daughter and stressfully rode across the Brooklyn Bridge, the Greenway project is a patient vision. "Realistically, it will be 10 years before the greenway is finished," he says. "It's important first to get dots and dashes on the map. It's our hope that our children and grandchildren will connect these dots."