



Community Boards promote Island needs, and are seeing results

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"We are the voice of the people. .. we are able to contact the agency and get their issues taken care of."

Note: this story has been updated to note that Community Board 2 merely voted in opposition of a proposal to construct 13, one-family houses on a 7-acre site in Richmond Town that is contiguous with Richmond Creek in an effort to preserve nearby wetlands. Their vote, however, was not able to stop the project.

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- When the New York Wheel and Empire Outlet projects were being touted as boons to the borough that promised benefits for North Shore -- and Staten Island as a whole -- the developers were required to comply with an intricate review process that included presenting their vision to Community Board 1.

At the time, the board pressed for a slew of conditions and amenities so the massive projects come with significant, guaranteed benefits for the borough's residents.

The board says their efforts helped get both developers to agree to a variety of improvements, including smart lights, increased Staten Island Ferry service, widening Richmond Terrace and Bank Street, an HOV lane on Richmond Terrace, coastal restoration and protection along the North and East shores, repairs of storm damage along Bay Street Landing and the inclusion of a labor agreement with the New York City Building Trades.

BOARDS' ROLE IN REVIEW PROCESS

Projects of this kind must undergo the city's Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP). It's a standardized process, and to pass it, the projects must gain approval from the community boards, the borough president, the City Planning Commission and the City Council.

Then, before voting for the projects, Councilwoman Debi Rose (D-North Shore) also added some Island-focused perks and, ultimately, the Wheel and outlet mall proposals -- with the all amenities attached -- were approved by the City Council.

'WE MADE A DIFFERENCE'

"She passed that through the City Council and that was history-making," said former Community Board 1 Chairwoman Leticia Remauro, who recently stepped down. "It changed the way things happen in the City Council. It had never been done before and we were the first to do it. We made a difference not only on Staten Island, but citywide, when dealing with large-scale projects."

Former chairwoman of

Community Board 1
Leticia Remauro.

While many dismiss the civic organizations as toothless tigers that have only an advisory role in city government, those who've worked on the boards or worked closely with them, say they are, in fact, an effective part of city government.

According to the City Charter, the boards' jobs include voting on land-use actions and recommending items to be included in the city budget for the betterment of their respective communities.

Board members are volunteers appointed by the borough president in consultation with the City Council delegation. The borough president names half and Council members recommend the others.

Community Board 3 Chairman Frank Morano said the board's main power comes from making recommendations on a number of community concerns in the areas of environment, youth services, traffic and transportation, education and parks and recreation.

"We are the voice of the people. We have our committee meetings and people come down to the meetings constantly and whatever concerns they have they present them to us and because we have an avenue into the city and city government ...we are able to contact the agency and get their issues taken care of," said Morano.

MORE THAN STREETLIGHTS, STOP-SIGNS

Morano said his board brought to elected officials' attention some key issues, for example, private streets, which originally were too narrow and built without sidewalks or curbs, now have to meet the same regulations as public streets.

Also, community facilities, which include medical offices, schools and day-care centers and can be built in residential areas, previously didn't require parking nor did the construction have to conform to the character of the community. Changes on both fronts are now required under the city's building code.

Morano said the board was also involved in advocating and sending letters to elected officials recommending the closure of the Fresh Kills Landfill and the closure and clean-up of Brookfield Landfill.

COUNCIL MEMBERS LISTEN

City Council Minority Leader Vincent Ignizio (R-South Shore) said the boards have been highly effective in fighting for the community.

"When they clearly articulate the concerns of the community, community boards I've worked with over the past decade have helped alter projects, have helped switch projects and have killed projects, so their role of being an ombudsman directly to the people has made our Island a better place."

Community Board 2 Chairman Dana Magee said for his district, "The only proposals and projects that are realized are those which are approved, after careful consideration and review, by the majority of our members."

He noted the board voted in opposition to the construction of 13, one-family houses on a 7-acre site in Richmond Town that is contiguous with Richmond Creek in order to preserve nearby wetlands. The board also voted against a proposed city juvenile facility at 1133 Forest Hill Rd. and a proposed bottle-and-can redemption center in Travis.

City Councilman Steven Matteo (R-Mid-Island) said he and Board 2 have been great partners over the years.

"I am particularly proud of the support they gave key initiatives of my tenure where we beat back the Beacon Avenue construction before it even went to the Board of Standards and Appeals and approving the West Shore Industrial Business Improvement District. They were also very supportive of getting the GRACE Foundation into its new building on the Seaview campus."

GETTING RESULTS

In addition to the NY Wheel and Empire Outlets, Community Board 1's other significant work includes funding for the North Shore Greenway Trail, helping make the National Lighthouse Museum a reality, and relocation plans for the Jersey Street Sanitation garage.

"It wasn't on anyone's radar to move it until Community Board 1 started pounding the drums that it needed it to be moved," said Ms. Remauro.

Former Borough President James Molinaro noted that community boards, "Bring to light a lot of situations that the borough president and his office is not aware of at times, that he can evaluate and move on."

Councilwoman Rose said it was her 28-year stint on Community Board 1 that made a difference. After seeing the board was able to make various beneficial changes for the community, "I realized that is where your voice is heard and that's what really propelled me into the world of city government."

Borough President James Oddo said, "Serving on a community board is an important way for citizens to get involved with their local government, and I take my job of appointing Community Board members very seriously. As borough president, I have opened the process to get a wider, more diverse group of applicants than in previous years."

Oddo noted for the first time last year he, along with CSI Professor Richard Flanagan, held a training session that provided a basic understanding of the responsibilities of levels of city government, focusing on the role of community boards.

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