

Developers out to fill big hole

BY JOHN LAUINGER

THE ECONOMIC downturn may be pushing the city close to recession, but Queens appears poised for a building boom in convention centers.

Plans are in various stages of development to build convention centers or conference space in five neighborhoods of Queens — and close a missing link in the borough's economy, business leaders said.

"Right now, it's a race to see who is going to get there first, because everyone recognizes the need," said Queens Chamber of Commerce Executive Vice President Jack Friedman.

"Queens lacks any kind of convention space," Friedman added, noting that the absence sends potential conferences and trade shows into Manhattan and Brooklyn — depriving many Queens companies, like car services and caterers, of revenue.

The grandest of the five plans calls for construction of a 400,000-square-foot convention center as part of Mayor Bloomberg's proposed mega-development for Willets Point. The City Council will cast a make-or-break vote on the controversial plan later this month.

Aqueduct race track also could be home to a 60,000-square-foot conference center and a 3,000-seat event center, according to Delaware North

Boro convention centers in works

Cos. of Buffalo, which will spend \$370 million to build a Las Vegas-style video slot machine parlor at the down-at-the-heels track.

"We think the excitement of the destination that we will create, its hospitality amenities and its proximity to JFK Airport, will help attract a significant audience for moderate-size conferences," said Delaware North President William Bissett.

The project that is the closest to becoming reality is the New York Mets' new ballpark, Citi Field, which will open next spring and feature more than 60,000 square feet of "hospitality space."

Silvercup Studios in Long Island City wants to build 40,000 square feet of conference space as part of its planned expansion.

Meanwhile, the Greater Jamaica Development Corp. says it is in talks with multiple developers to build 30,000 square feet of conference space at two hotels in the so-called "Airport Village" planned for downtown Jamaica.

With so much conference space planned for Queens, a question arises: How much is too much?

Friedman and other Queens business leaders said there is high demand for a less expensive alternative to the Jacob Javits Center in Manhattan.

"We're confident that we are going to draw people from the regional area," Friedman said. "We think it's sort of a 'Field of Dreams' scenario where if we build it, they will come."

Greater Jamaica Development Corp. President Carlisle Towery said the market will decide.

"Too much could be planned, but how much will get built will be decided by how the financing goes," he said.

John Seley, a professor of urban studies at Queens College, noted that some companies have come to prefer online forums over expensive conferences and business junkets.

He added that the economic downturn will make public financing extremely scarce.

"I just don't see it as a very likely possibility that any of them will happen without public funding," he said, excluding Citi Field.

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