The Brooklyn Paper
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January 5, 2010

The Domino does not fall as city begins review of $1.2B project

By Andy Campbell
The Brooklyn Paper


The developers of the old Domino Sugar factory on the Williamsburg waterfront put out new renderings this week as the project entered the public review process.

The $1.2-billion redevelopment of the old Domino Sugar factory — which calls for several skyscrapers surrounding a historic refinery building with a glass-walled penthouse along the Williamsburg waterfront — moved forward on Monday, as city officials deemed it ready to enter the eight-month public review phase

The "certification" of the project by the Department of City Planning starts a process that involves public hearings and votes by the community board, the borough president, the City Planning Commission and the City Council — all of which are expected to back a rezoning from manufacturing to residential to allow Community Preservation Corporation to build a 2,200-unit waterfront complex with a higher rate of affordable housing than other luxury developments nearby on the waterfront gold coast.

"This is a spectacular milestone," said Susan Pollock, senior vice president of Community Preservation Corporation, which bought the site just north of the Williamsburg Bridge in 2004 after Domino shut down operations. "We've worked very hard to get to this point. We can't find opposition because we've worked so well with advocacy groups and answered their concerns."

Pollock is exaggerating, as there are some dissenters. Assemblyman Joe Lentol (D-Williamsburg) has long been skeptical of multiple 30- and 40-story towers on the waterfront, and reiterated that he did not support the project because CPC never opened its books for him.

Others question whether there will ever again be a market for 1,600 units of luxury housing in a neighborhood with a glut of them.

But Lentol and others' nay-saying fell on ears that also heard Pollock's promise that 30 percent of the complex's units, or 660, would be set aside as below-market-rate housing, or roughly 220 units more than required by current zoning. The mixed-use project will also include four acres of publicly accessible recreation space, 274,000 square feet of retail space, and a waterfront esplanade.

"Hopefully, that will carry the day," she said.

CPC's affordable housing promises are also more generous than other developers because the rental units are pegged to lower incomes than in other projects. Under the current proposal, 100 rentals are reserved for families making just $21,000 per year, 330 rentals for families making up to $40,000 per year, 100-rentals for seniors who earn less than half of the area's median income, and 130 for-sale units for families making up to $90,000 per year.

The heavily subsidized project will be built in six phases. The first, at the refinery's former parking lot on Kent Avenue between S. Third and Fourth streets, would consist of 300 units — 50 percent of them affordable — to begin construction in early 2011. That site does not have waterfront views.

The historic refinery building — actually three landmarked structures that all played a role in the sugar-making process — would be redeveloped into 241 units and a large community facility. The 11-story building would be topped with a three- to four-story glass penthouse to "assist in meeting the project's goals and objectives" — legal jargon for allowing CPC to make some money on the fanciest units so that some is left over for the less profitable portion of the development.

One controversy over the preservation of the sugar company's iconic "Domino" sign was solved last year, when the architecture firm Beyer Blinder Belle reconfigured the glass addition to the refinery complex to include the sign.

CPC needs a rezoning because the Domino site was not included in the 2005 Williamsburg-Greenpoint waterfront rezoning because when that change was being formulated, the Domino plant was still in use, according to the project's environmental impact statement. The fact that the site is still zoned as manufacturing saved CPC on land acquisition costs, but now requires the rigors of a full (and expensive) public review. The company has spent considerably on public relations and lobbying.

The project's eight-month review process, called the Uniform Land-Use Review Procedure, will now move to Community Board 1, which will discuss the proposal in February.