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Anno Domino: City Planning certifies waterfront project

*By Aaron Short
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For Domino Sugar's developers, it's a sweet start to the new year.

After four years of planning, Williamsburg's waterfront is set to transform yet again. On January 4, the City Planning Commission certified a plan to rezone 11 acres of dilapidated property on the site of the former Domino Sugar refinery (Kent Avenue between Grand and South 5th Street) at the edge of the neighborhood's South Side.

"Today is a really spectacular milestone for us," said Susan Pollock, Senior Vice President of Community Preservation Corporation (CPC) Resources, which is proposing to redevelop the site. "We've really worked hard over the past four years, and we look forward to building this project on the Brooklyn waterfront."

The Department of City Planning's (DCP) certification of the Domino plan, known as New Domino, formally launched the city's Uniform Land Use Review Procedure which will require recommendations from Community Board 1, Borough President Marty Markowitz, and the City Council on the plan, which would change 11.2 acres of manufacturing zoned (M3-1) property to residential (R8 and R6) and commercial (C6-2) uses.

The proposal features 2,200 mixed-income units in five buildings, including 660 units of affordable housing and four acres of public open space with a riverfront esplanade providing public access to the East River. The historic brick sugar refinery, built in 1882 and landmarked in 2007, will anchor the site, surrounded by four glass residential towers 300- to 400-feet high. In the New Domino plan, the company's iconic sign will be preserved and affixed to the refinery building, but other nearby industrial buildings will be razed.

Community Preservation Corporation CEO Michael Lappin called the plan reflective of the best of New York, and pointed to the creation of "acres of parks, views of three bridges and affordable housing for hundreds of families" as its hallmark.

"The plan reflects what the community has told us it wants: a significant amount of truly affordable housing, respect for the fabric of the neighborhood, and access to public waterfront open space," said Lappin.

After spending nearly a year evaluating the impacts of development on the site, the DCP

submitted its Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), highlighting the effects on schools, child care, shadows, transportation and open space. A DPC representative expressed confidence that these impacts could be mitigated or at least partially mitigated and indicated that the School Construction Authority (SCA) may decide to add a K-8 school on the lower floors of a building at a later phase of development. At this time, the SCA does not anticipate the need for a new school.

City Planning Commission member Angela Battaglia praised the proposal, particularly the affordable housing present while echoing some concerns about the height of the towers and amount of underground parking.

“It is great that this site is finally being put to use,” said Battaglia. “I am very pleased by the affordability component. I think that’s delightful,”

Opponents to the plan, including Williamsburg resident Stephanie Eisenberg, remain concerned about the density of the site and believe that the city is underestimating the impact of the project on traffic and sewage in the neighborhood.

“It’s like putting a small city in very few blocks and the density is quite intense,” said Eisenberg. “It’s an ill-conceived project and I don’t think this is what North Brooklyn needs. The community gets next to nothing. Some New Year’s present.”

The City Planning Commission has nine days to review the EIS before passing it to Community Board 1, which has 60 days to comment publicly. Pollock and other CPC officials expect New Domino to be on CB 1’s Land Use Committee’s agenda this month or next.