



# **PARK SLOPE CIVIC COUNCIL**

## **MOVING FORWARD ON FOURTH A Report to the Community**

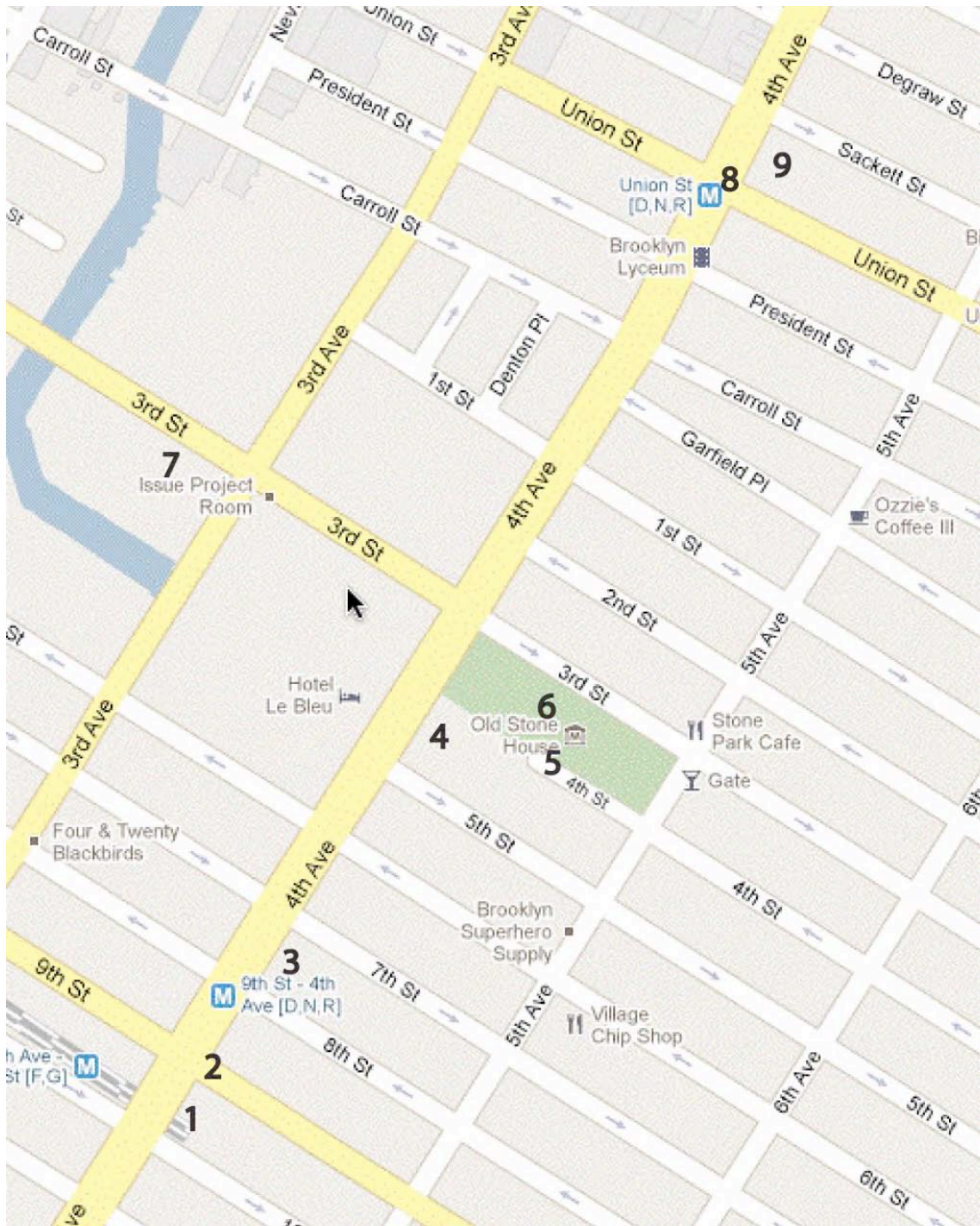
**November 6, 2010**

## Introduction and Purpose:

Fourth Avenue has recently seen a second round of development activity, however tepid, as condominium developments hobble towards completion. A handful of new restaurants, bars, hotels, day care centers, print shops, and coffee shops have sprung up recently along Fourth Avenue providing a glimmer of new retail life to this busy transportation corridor. Following up on its March 2010 Fourth Avenue Forum, The Park Slope Civic Council (PSCC) remains committed to analyzing and working to promote a bright future for Fourth Avenue

Under new zoning laws amended by the Department of City Planning (DCP) in the previous decade, high-rise condominiums up to a maximum of 12 stories were approved for zoning and eventually constructed. In an effort to encourage development along this transportation rich and underutilized corridor Department of City Planning (DCP) purposely set the bar low so not to scare away developers. As a result, some new buildings were built without ground floor retail or even any street facing windows. The impact of these designs is lifeless sidewalks that create an undesirable pedestrian space.

With the economic recession dragging on, an opportunity to rethink Fourth Avenue has been handed to the community. With more than enough hindsight we as a community can re-examine how Fourth Avenue development should move forward once the real estate market turns a corner. This process began early in 2010; independently of each other, the Brooklyn Borough President commissioned a visioning project for Fourth Avenue from the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University, and in March the PSCC held a forum called *The Future of Fourth Avenue*. The *Moving Forward on Fourth* walking tour, a follow-up to the March forum, marked the most recent step in a long process to develop a more cohesive vision for Fourth Avenue. The walking tour took place on Saturday, November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2010, consisted of approximately 65 participants and included stops at several focus areas. These stops are listed below with background information and a compilation of notes on participant questions, comments, input and feedback.



**Route of Walking Tour (stops are numbered)**

# ① Fourth Avenue – Ninth Street Station:



Current state of the decommissioned east side entrance



Rendering of possible new entrance and retail space

The east side of the Fourth Avenue – Ninth Street station has been closed for upwards of 25 years. But that may all change sometime soon. The MTA is currently rehabilitating the portion of this station complex serving the F and G lines and is considering reopening this entrance. PSCC is especially interested since the station entrance would provide safe pedestrian access to either side of Fourth Avenue without having to cross this otherwise busy street. The rehabilitation project also includes the opportunity to reopen underutilized ground floor retail space in the excess of 1,400 square feet. In early 2010 MTA New York City Transit (NYCT) gave a construction cost estimate for this work of \$3.5 million.

Participants commented on the lovely details of the station that “just need to be restored.” Others noted that the underpass needed to be repainted and better lit. Concern was also raised over the amount of asbestos that is being removed. Some participants asked whether an elevator is in the works for this station. (The answer is no; this is not among the 100 stations (out of 468) that NYCT has made or will make fully accessible.)

## ② Ninth Street Countdown Timers:



As part of the “Safe Streets” Action Plan & Pedestrian Safety Report released by the New York City Department of Transportation (DOT) in August 2010, some 1,500 countdown clocks will be installed at crosswalks throughout New York City, including along Fourth Avenue between 65<sup>th</sup> Street and Pacific Street. Fourth Avenue & Ninth Street was one of the first intersections to receive such installations as well as enlargements of sidewalk corners at the intersections (“bulb outs”) to reduce crossing lengths. The whole project aims to improve pedestrian safety by providing users with the allotted time remaining before a signal turns red. Furthermore it gives automobile users information about the length of time remaining at a red light.

A traffic camera has been installed at this intersection as well. Even with these welcome changes issues persist as noted by some of the walkabout participants. One brought up the need for better double-parking enforcement along Fourth Avenue. A counter point was made that the double-parking is actually good since it slows traffic down. Another participant added that while double-parking does slow traffic, it does not calm traffic since drivers become more frustrated. Indeed, there needs to be more creative solutions to efficiently move traffic considering Fourth Avenue is a major commuting hub.

### ③ Former St. Thomas Aquinas School: Fourth Ave at Ninth St



Photo Credit: Brooklyn Catholic Blog, July 31, 2010

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn has temporarily leased the former St. Thomas Aquinas School between Seventh and Eighth Streets to the New York City Department of Education to house PS 133 during their building project. At the conclusion of the construction of the new PS 133 (at Butler & Fourth Avenue) the former St. Thomas Aquinas School may well transfer to an entirely different use. Brooklyn Community Board Six (CB6) District Manager Craig Hammerman has proposed a project similar to the Museum of Modern Art's PS 1 space in Long Island City<sup>1</sup>. Some in the community have voiced concern about overtaxed schools in our area and the need for additional classroom space. St. Thomas Aquinas could fill the demand for classroom space in our community.

Still, the site could possibly be turned over or sold to a developer for condominium construction. The prospect of such raised questions of the current occupancy rate of similar completed projects. One participant noted that condos are currently selling at lower prices, causing some developers to convert their plans for condos into rental units. Another participant disagreed with the point noting that there is still very high demand. The exact numbers are not known but occupancy rates differ from site to site.

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<sup>1</sup> PS1 was built before the 1898 consolidation of New York City; some twenty years ago it was converted into a gallery for modern art.

## ④ NOVO Condominium Complex: Fourth Ave at Fifth St



The Novo Condominium: A positive example of what's possible in Condo Development on Fourth Avenue

The NOVO condominium, embedded into the footprint of Washington / JJ Byrne Park and the immediate surrounding area serve as a positive example of what is possible with well-planned, well-executed development. With ground floor retail space, the NOVO Condominium complex provides a more transparent streetscape. With the building entrance - which is expansive, heavily-landscaped and green - in the back (accessed via Fifth Street) residents are given a grand lobby and car-parking without sacrificing street facing retail space. Furthermore, the condo developer agreed to refurbish some of the park space that it used for staging the construction resulting in the largest private redevelopment of a public space in Brooklyn. The result is a skate park as well as basketball and handball courts. Not only did the community get improved park space but it also got a local partner, The Novo Condominium residents, to take responsibility for cleaning and maintaining the handball courts. NOVO condominium residents have also taken the initiative to, in conjunction with the Old Stone House, landscape, beautify and green a 100 foot stretch of City sidewalk along Fifth Street between Fourth Avenue and MS 51 by planting bushes, flowers, shrubbery and embedding decorative cobblestone in the ground.

## **5** II Byrne / Washington Park: Fourth Av between Fifth St & Third St



Plans are currently afoot to change Fourth Street into a car free multi-use public plaza or “play street.” Currently the dead-end street serves primarily as a parking lot for teachers. Talks have taken place with PSCC, Middle School 51, the Park Slope Fifth Avenue Business Improvement District (BID), and DOT about other on street parking that would be made available to accommodate teachers. In freeing up the Fourth Street cul-de-sac to pedestrians, multiple uses can be envisioned. Most notable is the added playground space for children and the creation of a campus-like atmosphere for the school that would result. A paved surface would still exist, as the street would need to service emergency vehicles and different user groups such as the farmers’ market and other street fair activities. An excellent example of a working play street in New York City that could inform the planning of a Fourth Street play street is on 78<sup>th</sup> Street along Travers Park in Jackson Heights.



## ⑥ Old Stone House: JJ Byrne / Washington Park



At the Old Stone House stop, director Kim Maier presented many updated plans. The Old Stone House is trying to create a sense of a town square by putting in a garden and holding garden events like “Compostarama”. The Old Stone House isn’t just a structure to house bathrooms. In fact it’s a cultural hub that includes readings, concerts, screenings, plays, events, fairs, chamber music, and much more. The \$2.5 million park project also includes the already-installed, much lauded synthetic turf field as well as the soon to be renovated playground space. The next step of the project is scheduled to begin March 2011 with construction lasting until March 2012. A new Parks building is also in the works, which will serve as a community use space (which is in constant need.) It will consist of a rehearsal space, meeting space and more, freeing up gallery space for the Old Stone House.

Ideas discussed on the tour included an enlarged and redesigned park entrance at Fourth Avenue that could greatly enhance the park visibility and access from Fourth Avenue. The arched entrance, as proposed and discussed in one of the groups on the tour, could include increased bicycle parking as well as programming and facilities information on an all-weather bulletin board.



Rendering of the proposed information booth on Fifth Avenue in the newly redesigned Byrne Park



VIEW 1



VIEW 2



VIEW 3

Proposed landscaping plans for JJ Byrne / Washington Park

## 7 Whole Foods:



Photo Credit: McBrooklyn Blog, November 30, 2010

For some time it has been known that Whole Foods is planning a store at Third Street and Third Avenue. While Whole Food's contractors completed site remediation work in the summer of 2010 it is still unclear how long it will be before the site is redeveloped. While the notion of a Whole Foods store is generally welcomed in the area, some in the community (as expressed via Eric Mclure, the operator of ParkSlopeNeighbors.com) take issue with their specific building development plans and have advocated for a smaller overall building and car parking footprint. Apparently, the site is permitted for 10,000 sq. feet while the building plan allegedly calls for a 64,000 square-foot, partly below-grade building, including a 420 car-parking garage. It is argued that the below grade structure might be impractical considering the flooding issues endemic to the location.<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Mclure further advocated against such a large footprint and parking spot count due to the number of car trips (an anticipated 1500 car trips to the store per day) . Mr. Mclure claimed that this number is two-thirds of the anticipated car traffic at the Barclays Center arena at Atlantic Yards. Whole Foods apparently offers the opportunity of multimodal transportation to offset approximately 800,000 car trips/year. The original parking plan was based on a suburban store model but In Park Slope, 40% of households own vehicles, compared with 90% in the suburbs. Even Fairway, out in the transit desert of Red Hook, has a 300-car parking lot that is only two-thirds filled on a typical weekend. Through a shuttle, pedi-cab, and bike-parking program much of the unnecessary parking demands could be dealt with.

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<sup>2</sup> Following the walkabout, Whole Foods issued a revised site plan for, among other things, a smaller structure and less parking.

PSCC and Park Slope Neighbors have also advocated for a green roof and bio-swales that factor in with the sponge swamps that are proposed in the Gowanus Canal cleanup.

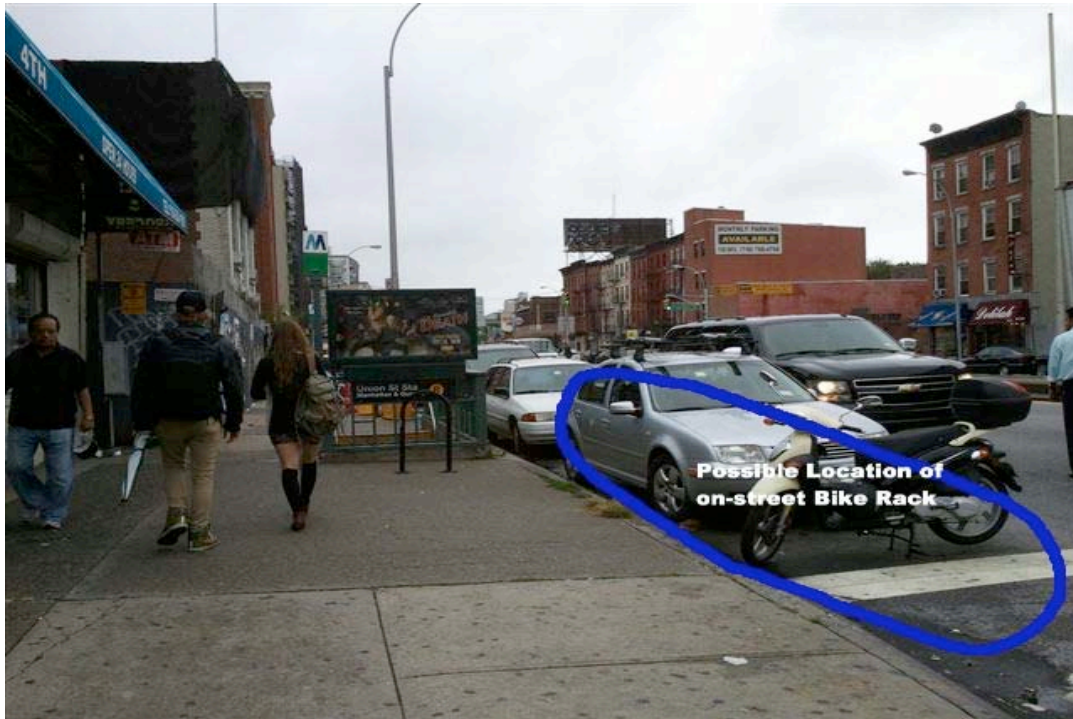
The discussion about a possible green-roof led to another question by a tour participant about whether the proposed store would be LEED certified since LEED points factor-in parking. Another person noted that there is no onsite parking at the Lower East Side store in Manhattan, while another countered that car-ownership rates are not comparable between Manhattan and Brooklyn.

Adding perspective to the discussion, a community member pointed out that the Park Slope Food Coop serves tens of thousands of members, and 200 + shoppers/month use the adjacent parking garage to park. State Assembly Member Joan Millman's office says Whole Foods will make an announcement soon about the future planning of the site.



A rendering of the proposed Whole Foods design for Third Avenue at Third Street.

## ⑧ Union Street:



Union Street has seen improvements to its subway station access to prevent flooding via construction of a few extra steps at the street level. Contributing to the hub like atmosphere of Fourth Avenue at Union Street is the fact that Union Street is one of the major connecting roads from Carroll Gardens to Prospect Park, via the bridge over the Gowanus Canal. Adding to the congestion is the multimodal nature (cars, bicyclists, and pedestrians) of the road and the fact that the bike lane running east on Union Street terminates at Fourth Avenue. All these issues cause the intersection to have a higher number of accidents. The enlargement of the median in 2010 and elimination of the left turn from northbound Fourth Avenue to westbound Union Street in 2008 reduced traffic accidents yet more can be accomplished.

Concerns were also raised over the short time to cross Fourth Avenue. This has been known to make the crosswalk treacherous to some. An idea proposed by a participant to slow traffic would include similar street treatments at Fourth Avenue and Ninth Street. In addition to the bulb-outs and countdown traffic timers, it was suggested that on-street bicycle parking be considered in lieu of parking spaces at the corners, which would add to pedestrian visibility as cars turned the corners and increase safety. Rounding out the suggestions was the idea to create a gateway across Union Street that would announce that you've arrived in "residential" Park Slope and slow speeding Fourth Avenue drivers down as they turned onto Union Street.

## 9 Sackett Street Lot (Third Water Tunnel Shaft 22B):



The vacant space surrounding the Third Water Tunnel access shaft presents a unique opportunity for a public green space. For three decades the lot has been vacant but with the completion of this section of the Third Water Tunnel nearing, the opportunity exists to develop the land into a passive recreation park or community garden. Past recommendations included a native plant garden and a comprehensive design was created in 1999 by a local artist, Meg Webster and presented to the City's Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), which controls the site. Unfortunately that plan cannot be implemented as designed since the City needs access to the ventilation shafts for maintenance and security reasons.

While permanent plans are still brewing, an interim garden has been proposed and is being actively pursued by CB6 and Activists from The Garden of Union (on Union Street between Fifth Avenue & Fourth Avenue). In early December 2010 DEP is scheduled to meet with CB6, the PSCC, and participants in the walkabout in a meeting and site visit to review the site and a possible schedule for allowing community access to a portion of this space. Volunteers will be crucial in creating this space for the community so outreach will be required. So far the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, the Percentage for the Arts and the community garden movement has been included in the discussion with DEP, as well as the PSCC and CB6. The discussion will not include the removal of the fencing, as it is a security requirement. But more than one walking tour participant proposed a nicer fencing alternative, in lieu of the current unsightly chain-link fencing

Even with the plans to turn part of the site into a community green space there are still concerns about access. One participant voiced such a concern and requested that the green space be available to access more like a public park. Even going as far as suggesting that a Parks Department employee be on duty to extend the hours beyond the sporadic hours that community gardens have.

## Various Development Sites:



The Argyle: An example of poorly implemented street-level treatment



Possible plans for 438 Fourth Avenue

After new development ushered in blank ground floors and a less than sensitive building context, the community is advocating a greater amount of care in the planning process. Several sites are being developed, one at the southeast and northeast corner of Sixth Street, another between Seventh and Eighth Street as well as one between Eighth and Ninth Street. Walkabout coordinator Josh Levy pointed out that ground floor retail is being factored into the building plans of at least the Eighth/Ninth Street site, according to the developer. Of course with ground floor retail comes a delicate trade-off for developers who try to meet the needs of tenants by also providing large beautiful lobbies, bike storage and parking access all crammed in at ground level. Whatever people's sentiments were for these new structures, the point was made that having a building located at these vacant lots is better than having nothing at all. Of course with the recession came the reluctance for banks to lend any more money so the projects ran out of steam and therefore remain stuck in limbo.

While zoning has favored condominium development there has been other developmental trends such as hotels popping up in the vicinity. New hotels have located on Union and President Streets at Third Avenue, and the Le Hotel Bleu has opened on Fourth Avenue. While this is all welcome news to the community the night club located at the top of Le Hotel Bleu was not well received and has since been transformed into a very favorably reviewed Italian restaurant with striking views of the city. Nonetheless, participants pointed out how the Hotel's setback to allow parking in the front has created a less than desirable site and does not promote a vibrant, robust experience along Fourth Avenue.

Any review of zoning on Fourth Avenue should review the use of setbacks in order to create a more uniform street front along Fourth Avenue.

The current zoning of Fourth Avenue is part of a compromise that the PSCC helped bring about, that maintains contextual zoning going eastward from a point 100 feet east of Fourth Avenue. This focused higher-density development where the street was wide, the existing building stock very mixed, and where there was a subway line. Today that density commitment stands as people like Borough President Marty Markowitz envision a Park Avenue of Brooklyn. Whether or not that is realized is to be determined. In any case Mr. Markowitz's office has put together a Vision Plan for Fourth Avenue to ensure a more cohesive vision is achieved.

The community still has concerns with the zoning changes made by the New York City Department of City Planning (DCP) since they did not address street level transparency. Perhaps some zoning revisions can be amended to the code to allow for transparency while forcing parking below grade, as in other neighborhoods. Now is the time for the Fourth Avenue community to demand that new construction in the Fourth Avenue zone be harmonious with neighboring buildings on side streets. One participant requested that the PSCC fight for amendments for better zoning or design standards.

Concerns over site development mostly revolved around

**1.) The lack of street-level retail**

**2.) Permissible building heights**

**3.) Concerns over parking.** Whether there is too much or too little parking depends on whom one asks; either way, it is a contentious issue. Current parking requirements are set at 40% of the number of units while sites under 10,000 sq. feet have requirements waived. One or two participants said that compulsory parking spaces in new buildings along Fourth Avenue should be discouraged, while many others disagreed. Parking questions even focused on whether anyone had done a survey to determine how many spaces had been rented/bought by residents of the buildings. Concerns of course have been raised about the relationship of development in the study area and the stadium development.

Other areas of great concern include school capacity and other infrastructure resources that may be overly taxed. Such a question gave rise to a question of the demographic make up of new condo residents. Are they young families or couples? One must consider the precise demographics in order to address what infrastructure resources need upgrading. Former City Council Member David Yassky tried to address this with legislation he passed requiring new condo development to analyze existing infrastructure and its ability to absorb new residents. With such legislation on the books the City could properly address neighborhood concerns and whether, or how, to consider existing assets such as St. Thomas Aquinas.



Even with the commitment by the city focusing on density some community members would rather see down zoning along Fourth Avenue. This is especially of concern for those residents within the vicinity of a new high-rise condominium since these buildings cast large shadows over existing low-rise buildings. One person noted how they like to see the horizon in Brooklyn and that keeping the low scale built environment intact should be the primary concern of any zoning amendments. This idea was further discussed during the walkabout's "after event" at Zora's Café and Gallery among a group of people.

## MORE Trees along Fourth Avenue



Photo Credit: New York Times, City Room Blog, October 9, 2007

It was agreed on the walking tour that additional planting of new trees would greatly add to the allure of Fourth Avenue. New trees would serve a triple purpose of slowing traffic, beautifying the streets, and improving air quality. The group discussed how planting of trees (every 75 or 100 feet along the sidewalks, for example) might be possible, but the subway tunnel under the median limits where trees can be planted. In addition, there was concern voiced over the possible changing of traffic patterns. The overall goal though is safer streets through safer design. This has been an initiative that City Council Member Brad Lander's office has spearheaded. In creating streets with pedestrians, trees, and a dense building stock it is anticipated that automobile traffic can be slowed down to the reasonable speed of approximately 30 mph, which is the city-wide speed limit. Part of the solution might also involve crossing guards to be stationed on Third Street.

A comment by one participant even got into the specifics by suggesting a minimum of three trees per block on either side from Atlantic to Ninth Street. The suggesting was based on the Mayor's million trees initiative and felt that planting trees on the sidewalks would be more cost effective than the costly planters along the Fourth Avenue median. Another participant requested that there be not just lots and lots of trees but bike racks for bicyclists so that the trees don't become *de facto* bike racks. The concern being that when trees are left as the only source of locking up a bike then it contributes to the death of a tree with the rough chains that are used to lock up bikes.

## Overall Comments:

Some comments focused on the whole span of Fourth Avenue instead of a particular section, while some comments addressed issues of an area that we did not stop at. Either way the comments below are parsed together to explain some of the concerns that participants have.

One issue that was raised was the problem with flooding along Fourth Avenue, particularly in the vicinity of President and Garfield Street. As trash is washed down the Slope it tends to collect at Fourth Avenue in the drainage grates and with the ease of water collecting in the area a resulting minor flood ensues. It is especially concerning since no one wants to utilize the commercial space west of Fourth Avenue due to the flooding.

Specific comments even arose over issues such as the lack of a pharmacy. A specific request was even made to place a pharmacy in the vacant corner lot out front of the Staples/Pep Boys complex. The concern was that most pharmacies are up on Fifth Avenue and even then there are few to accommodate all the residents in the neighborhood, especially those who live on Fourth Avenue between Atlantic Avenue and Ninth Street.

An interesting comment was also raised over the city's recently published Active Design Guidelines and the opportunity to get several public agencies involved with the planning of a more walkable and bikeable streetscape. Such offices as the Departments of Health, City Planning, and Transportation as well as the Mayor's Office are working to make the cities built environment more active and livable. Fourth Avenue could become a poster child for the cities active design guideline efforts if it were to be redesigned into a vibrant street for the community.

All in all, most everyone was agreed: The future of Fourth Avenue can be extremely bright with limitless possibilities... but only if we all take the proper steps, action and planning ... Now.



Rendering of the possibilities along Fourth Avenue