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# The Park Slope Civic Council CIVIC NEWS

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## *Report from the Forum on the Future of 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue* **What a Lovable Street it Could Be**

**4<sup>th</sup>** Avenue gets no love. Its new construction is the subject of ridicule and dismay. Pedestrians avoid its sidewalks and dread its crosswalks. Its few trees look more like the last survivors of an encroaching desert than emissaries from nature. Even the motorists who it now primarily serves pay it scant attention: a means of getting from here to there, scarcely to be noticed.

But what a lovable street it could be—or so insisted the panelists at “The Future of 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue,” the Civic Council’s March 4 public forum that drew some 200 people to the Community Hall at St. Thomas Aquinas Church, at the Avenue’s intersection with 9<sup>th</sup> Street.

It has the length and breadth of a boulevard. Its median could support a greensward. It has its own subway and ample space for cars and trucks to share with bikes and rapid-transit buses. There is room for more new construction along its length—built this time with storefronts, style, quality and housing for people of all incomes.

And it has that most precious of New York commodities: location. Its six miles, stretching from the Verrazano Bridge to Flatbush Avenue, link a chain of vibrant neighborhoods. At our end of the avenue, its six lanes provide an interface between stable and prosperous Park Slope on the east and edgy, artsy and industrial Gowanus to the west.

Leverage all its assets, the panelists said, and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue could be transformed from a thru-way into a living and livable street, from a means to other ends into a destination in its own right. They offered varied but interrelated prescriptions for achieving 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue’s potential and for transforming it into something more than a get-rich-quick developer might love.

To change life along 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, change the nature of 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, urged Ethan Kent, vice president of the Project Public Spaces. The essential first step, he said, is to develop a vision of the community we want on 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue and then organize around that vision. The roadway with all its speeding traffic shapes the community now—or, more accurately, the roadway as speedway prevents the development of any real sense of neighborhood along its length.

“Stop planning for automobile speed and capacity and take up a broader set of needs,” Kent argued. “Plan for community-based outcomes, for the healthy community we want to be.”

Craig Hammerman, district manager of Brooklyn Community Board 6, said people have to get organized and political and find

ways to build on 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue’s strengths, including the increased numbers of people who now call it home, the subway that runs beneath its pavement, the hotels that have sprung up on and near it and the hundreds of millions of people around the world who see it on television when 44,000 competitors traverse it each year in the New York City Marathon.

“People and business need to organize to bring street life to 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue,” said Hammerman, who repeatedly exhorted the crowd, “We can do better.”

Ryan Lynch, senior planner for the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, said it is hard to have street life along a death threat, pointing out

that 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue has the dubious honor of being Brooklyn’s third most dangerous roadway. The street needs to be “put on a diet,” and while the optimal solution might be bike and bus lanes, even such simple and salutary measures as street trees have been proven to slow drivers down by narrowing their field of vision.

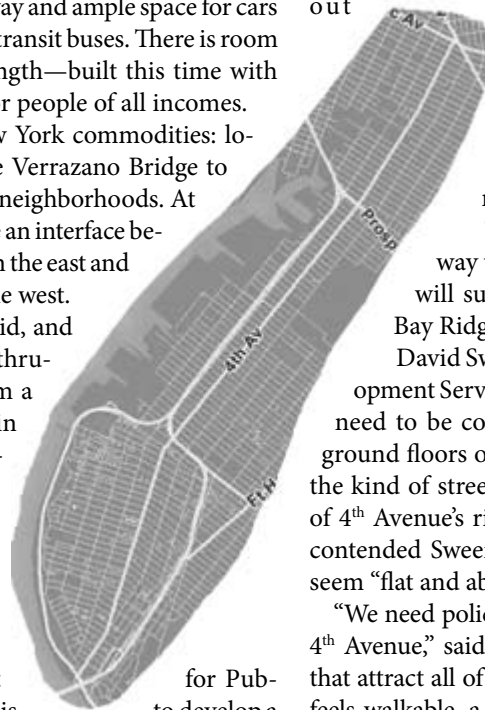
“Fourth Avenue needs to be completed as a roadway that will benefit all its users,” said Lynch, “and that will support livable neighborhoods from Park Slope to Bay Ridge.”

David Sweeney, founder and president of the Public Development Services Corporation, argued that his fellow developers need to be convinced or perhaps even forced to integrate the ground floors of their buildings into the neighborhood, to create the kind of street life and micro retail that would make the most of 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue’s rich potential. Much of the new building thus far, contended Sweeney, discourages street life and makes the street seem “flat and abysmal.”

“We need policies to encourage a neighborhood sensibility along 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue,” said Sweeney. “We need buildings with the attributes that attract all of us to neighborhoods: a physical environment that feels walkable, a street wall that feels human scale, variegated and diversified.”

In the same way that new construction should be designed from the street up, Elizabeth Yeampierre argued that organizing for a better 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue should be done from the grassroots up.

Yeampierre, executive director of the Sunset Park community organization UPROSE, described the fear among her neighbors that any improvements to 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue will be harbingers of gentrification and the wholesale displacement that too often follows. The best way to assuage those fears is to give the people who live along 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue,



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## After 'The Future of 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue' Forum

# Where Do We Go From Here?

Many of the Civic Council's annual forums—on garbage, sustainability, traffic and transportation and the historic district, to name just a few—have had far-reaching consequences, spurring advocacy, spinning off new community groups and inspiring citizen activism.

This year's forum, "The Future of 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue," held March 4 in the Community Hall at St. Thomas Aquinas Church, should follow in that tradition. The gathering was notable in many respects including its subject, location and participants. As panelist Purnima Kapur of the City Planning Commission noted, it would have been unthinkable 10 years ago for PSCC to have a forum *about* 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, or to have it *on* 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Also notable was our outreach to other civic organizations and communities. The panelists included Ryan Lynch, a member of neighboring Community Board 7, and Elizabeth Yeampierre, executive director of UPROSE in Sunset Park. We passed out over 1,000 palm cards at subway stations from Pacific to 36<sup>th</sup> Streets and saw lots of new faces at the forum.

Community building began that night, with people sitting around tables sharing impressions and ideas rather than sitting in church pews and simply listening to presentations. Judging from the attendance, the large number of people who filled out surveys and the pre- and post-forum "buzz," there is clearly great interest in this subject. The forum was a good thing for the Civic Council to have done and to have done well. But what's next? How do we harness the momentum generated by the forum?

While people have always lived along and around 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, the zoning changes of recent years have brought many new faces to Park Slope, Sunset Park, Bay Ridge and Fort Hamilton. Besides the pressures of development along the avenue, the Atlantic Yards project will present as-yet undetermined challenges. Maintaining a balance of uses on 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and making it a street that better serves the people who live there, will be tricky.

One theme expressed again and again at the forum was the need for the community to get involved, to take ownership of the issues

affecting 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue. The Civic Council sees the forum not as a "one-off" event, but as the beginning of this process—one that will start soon with follow-up from the PSCC online and in meetings. This outreach will let residents and businesses know there is a civic organization eager to work with them, to help give them a stronger sense of community, to help make 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue a more livable street and to ensure that a new vision for 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue emerges from the community rather than from a top-down plan. To this end, the Civic Council is eager to work with neighboring groups and the 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue community. If a new civic organization emerges specific to this place and purpose, we will support it enthusiastically.

PSCC has already advocated a number of improvements to the avenue. In 2008, our efforts resulted in the conversion of the left-turn lane at Union Street into an expanded pedestrian refuge for people crossing to and from the subway station. That same year, to reduce the pedestrian volume crossing 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue and to create a more vibrant streetscape, we released a proposal to reopen a long-closed subway entrance between 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Streets and to

develop retail space underneath the subway viaduct. Both MTA New York City Transit and the Borough President's office have expressed interest in this project, for which we will continue to advocate. We will also continue to push implementation of a plan ready since 1999 to turn the vacant lot at Sackett Street, used by the Department of Environmental Protection for access to the Third Water Tunnel, into a public garden.

Borough President Marty Markowitz has engaged a team of students from NYU's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service to develop a scope for his vision of 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue as a beautiful boulevard. We view this effort as complementary to ours and were pleased to have several members of the NYU team and the Borough President's transportation analyst, Luke DePalma, at the forum. We will be sharing the results of surveys taken at the forum with the NYU team.

We do caution against attempting to develop a master plan for all of 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, if only because it is not uniform along its length. In Sunset Park for example, it suffers from the pollution and spillover traffic generated by the Gowanus Expressway. Also, more people live along 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue to the south of 39<sup>th</sup> Street than to the north.

Any plan for 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue should aim not just to create temporary construction jobs but to preserve the jobs provided by the many small businesses along the avenue. Further, 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue needs to be a place where there is *good* housing for people at *all* income levels.

The variable character of the avenue and its balance of uses—residential, commercial, transportation, public space—must inform our efforts going forward. Fourth Avenue is part of Park Slope, and the Park Slope Civic Council has a major and natural interest in it. Fourth Avenue is a work in progress; let's get it right.

—Michael Cairl, Chair, Livable Streets Committee

E-mail fo4a@parkslopeciviccouncil.org to get involved. To find out more, go to <http://parkslopeciviccouncil.org/futureof4thavenue>.

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*Fourth Avenue is a work in progress; let's get it right.*

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### CALENDAR

For details and additional listings, go to [parkslopeciviccouncil.org](http://parkslopeciviccouncil.org).

#### PSCC Monthly Meeting

Thursday, April 1, 7pm, New York Methodist Hospital  
Executive Dining Room

#### Spring Civic Sweep/Electronics Recycling

Saturday, April 17, 10am-2pm. Sign up and pick up supplies  
in front of the Prospect Park YMCA, 9th Street

#### PSCC Monthly Meeting

Thursday, May 6, 7pm, New York Methodist Hospital  
Executive Dining Room

#### 51st Annual House Tour

Sunday, May 16, noon-5pm. Starting point: Poly Prep Lower School,  
50 Prospect Park West at 1<sup>st</sup> Street. Tickets are on sale now through  
our web site.

# News & Notes for the Civic Minded

**Historic District Update:** The Park Slope Historic District was created in 1973. If the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) sticks to its schedule, the long wait for expansion may be close to an end. In late February, PSCC learned that the LPC may finalize the first phase of expansion by the end of 2011.

Don't break out the champagne quite yet. Several important steps must still be traversed.

In the next few weeks, LPC Commissioners will tour the expansion area and LPC staff will then set its final boundaries. Their proposal will be presented at a public meeting, likely sometime this summer, where questions from property owners will be addressed. The LPC will then start preparing the designation report, which documents the provenance and architectural style of buildings in the expansion area. (A map of the proposed area is on the PSCC website.)

Formal designation would come after a public hearing next year, where the Commission will hear from the various neighborhood stakeholders. As we have emphasized in past articles, the support of the community is vital to achieving our goal. Please write LPC Chair Robert Tierney (a sample letter follows) and let him know that 37 years is a sufficient period to wait for more of Park Slope to be protected.

—Peter Bray, chair, Historic District Committee

Mr. Robert Tierney, Chair NYC  
Landmarks Preservation Commission  
1 Centre Street, 9th Floor  
New York, New York 10007

Re: Expanding the Park Slope Historic District

Dear Mr. Tierney:

I am writing to ask that the Landmarks Preservation Commission act with all deliberate speed to designate an expansion of the Park Slope Historic District to the South Slope and 7th Avenue. The 800 buildings that comprise the area proposed by the Park Slope Civic Council for the first phase expansion of the historic district possess a high degree of architectural and historical merit and integrity and deserve to receive this important protection.

In recent years, many Park Slope buildings with similar quality have been demolished or inappropriately altered. Designation of a larger historic district will ensure that Park Slope retains the historical and architectural character that make it one of the finest 19th century neighborhoods in the nation.

Historic designation has been an important factor in the preservation of Park Slope's character since the early 1970's, but the initial designation covered only a quarter of what the American Planning Association has declared to be one of America's ten greatest neighborhoods. We cannot put at further risk its unique sense of place, historical character, and small scale commercial streetscapes that make Park Slope such an attractive place to live, work, shop and entertain.

I strongly urge the Commission to act quickly to extend historic district designation to a much larger area of Park Slope.

Thank you for your support.

**Atlantic Yards Update:** BrooklynSpeaks, including PSCC, issued this statement in response to the rejection of its recent lawsuit:

*The BrooklynSpeaks sponsors are disappointed that the court did not reverse the approval of the Atlantic Yards' 2009 Modified General Project Plan.*

*Although Judge Friedman ruled against the community's petition, she criticized the Empire State Development Corporation's rationale for continuing to rely on the previously-estimated 10-year build out as "marginally sufficient to survive judicial scrutiny under the limited SEQRA standard," and observed that ESDC's review of the 2009 Modified General*

*Project Plan "lacked the candor that the public was entitled to expect, particularly in light of the scale of the Project and its impact on the community." We couldn't agree more.*

*Unfortunately, the judge was not able to consider documents from Atlantic Yards' master closing because those documents weren't made public until after the court hearing. The closing documents conclusively establish that the ESDC had no intention of requiring Forest City Ratner to deliver the project on the timeline that was described in the 2009 Modified General Project Plan.*

*It is now clear that the project the agency has agreed to allow the developer to build will have significantly greater environmental impacts and drastically reduced public benefits when compared to those the ESDC had previously disclosed. This sad state of affairs is compounded by the fact that the only environmental impacts studied were those flowing from the 2006 Plan, and the very governmental entities charged with protecting the public from adverse environmental impacts have effectively agreed to look the other way with respect to 15 additional years of construction.*

*For now, Atlantic Yards continues to stand alone as a State project with no formal oversight or meaningful public representation in decision-making. However, now that the definitive agreements between ESDC and Forest City Ratner have been made public, the BrooklynSpeaks petitioners are considering further legal options, including seeking reconsideration in light of the new documentation or an appeal. It is long past time that the special treatment enjoyed by this developer end, and Atlantic Yards is brought onto the same playing field as other large ESDC projects.*

Much more information may be found at [brooklynspeaks.net](http://brooklynspeaks.net). The article "Reform Efforts Rebuffed, PSCC Joins Atlantic Yards Lawsuit," which appeared in the January *Civic News*, may be read at <http://park-slopeciviccouncil.org/index.php?section=atlanticyards&prid=215>.

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## Viewing Brooklyn

# The Greenhouses of Prospect Park

Most people may think of Prospect Park as a warm weather destination, but clearly the designers of the park, Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted, wanted it to be a place for all seasons, as did the park commissioners and landscape architects

numbering not less than 70 varieties.”

The 1900 expansion planned by Commissioner Brower included the use of the “East Side Land.” That area was already owned by the city of Brooklyn and was at the end of Brooklyn at the Flatbush town line. The land formed a triangle bounded by Eastern Parkway, Washington Avenue and Flatbush Avenue. A reservoir, where the library and Mt. Prospect Park now stand, took up part of the land, and the area that is now the Brooklyn Botanic Garden was being used as an ash dump. Many uses had been proposed for the East Side Land, including making it the home of Brooklyn College, and some maps from around 1895 call the triangle “Institute Park.”\* As early as 1897, the park commissioner’s annual report mentions that four greenhouses would be transferred to the East Side Land for more room and better surroundings. Though the state legislature reserved 39 acres for a botanic garden in 1897, it wasn’t founded until 1910.

The greenhouses were still drawing crowds in 1955 when Parks Commissioner Robert Moses urged Borough President John Cashmore to demolish the Prospect Park greenhouses for economic reasons, arguing that there were plenty of greenhouses at the Botanic Garden. Many other changes that we now see as detrimental came about during Moses’ tenure. The Prospect Park Alliance and its current landscape architect, Christian Zimmerman, are working to restore some parts of the Park to its pre-Moses days, including the area around the skating rink. A new skating rink will allow for the restoration of lake vistas and Concert

who followed.

A Jan. 13, 1900 article in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* noted that even though “the average citizen is inclined to the belief that because all has been made snug for winter” and “the greater part of the menagerie has been sent to the zoo in the Bronx for the winter” and “the sheep warmly housed,” many thousands of people continued to use the park, including not just ice skaters but also visitors to its greenhouses. The article reported that Park Commissioner Brower was busy planning to expand the greenhouses, which were located just off Prospect Park West (then 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue) between 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Streets, where the Parks Department has its garage complex today.

The first greenhouse was built in 1889 and several later additions included the Palm House, opened in February 1900 to accommodate the 35-foot-tall palm trees that were literally growing through the roof of the original building. In 1894, a second greenhouse conservatory was built near the site of the Lincoln Road Playground. The greenhouses were especially popular around Easter when they were filled with blooms and often had formal displays. The *Eagle* noted in March 1902 that the greenhouses had Easter lilies “arranged in the shape of a huge cross, more than two hundred plants being included in the general design.” As spring advanced there were flowers on the outside, too. In April 1902 the *Eagle* reported on the “spring show in the park consisting of 30-40,000 bulbs in full bloom, especially along the East Drive, as well as 15-20,000 persons visiting the greenhouses on each Sunday.”

November 1896 saw the beginning of an annual fall exhibit of chrysanthemums, orchids, palms and ferns. Though park employees grew many of the mums from cuttings and cultivated them so that they would all bloom at the same time, sources mention that Weir Florists contributed to some of the displays. Weir is still in operation and has a large greenhouse on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue just opposite the main entrance to Green-Wood Cemetery. The *Eagle* reported on Nov. 3, 1901, that between 300 and 400 people would be waiting to get into the conservatories from morning to dusk, and that the total number of visitors would be between 10,000 and 12,000 by day’s end. In addition to the chrysanthemum show, which was in the Palm House, the crowd visited the other greenhouses and the newly completed Cactus House.

The fall show ran through Thanksgiving and was followed by a Christmas show that often included orchids that the parks commissioner brought back from Florida or purchased from the tropics. The *Eagle* described one show as including “fully 1,000 orchids,





Clockwise from bottom left: a Prospect Park greenhouse circa 1905; half an 1897 hand-colored stereo photo showing the fall display of chrysanthemums; The Easter 1942 display featured lillies in the shape of the cross and a sign reading "Victory—Buy Defense Bonds"; a proposed design for the "East Side Land" that shows it being used as the site for Brooklyn College (instead of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden). The original main library design is in the foreground, and the Brooklyn Museum in the background.

Chrysanthemums—500 Varieties. Copyright 1897 by Northwester & Wynand.



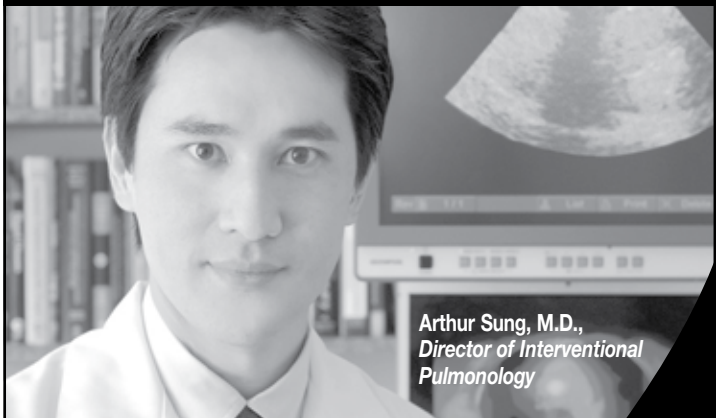
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Grove, where someday we might hear music once again. The greenhouses, though, are likely lost forever.  
—Bob Levine, Trustee and PSCC Historian

\*Instead of Institute Park, Brooklyn College held its first classes in 1911 in the Willoughby Building at the corner of Willoughby and Bridge streets. It later moved to Crown Heights, also known as Crow Hill, on the former site of the County Penitentiary between Nostrand and Rodgers Avenues and President and Montgomery Streets, where some Medgar Evers College buildings are today. On May 15, 1930, the Board of Higher Education of the City of New York officially established Brooklyn College of the College of the City of New York. It included the merged Brooklyn branches of Hunter College (a women's college) and the College of the City of New York (men only), making Brooklyn College the first public, coeducational liberal arts college in the city of New York. The school moved to its current campus in 1938.

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**4th Avenue**, continued from Page 1

and those who make their livelihoods there, a place at the table.

"If you involve everyone in the process, they will own it," said Yeampierre.

"Fourth Avenue is huge and it's wide, and it needs to be slowed down and greened up, but any visioning process must be community led and not imposed from the outside," she cautioned. "When people in Sunset Park hear talk of 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue being transformed into Brooklyn's Park Avenue, they get very worried."

Among the panelists, only Purnima Kapur, director of the Brooklyn office of the Department of City Planning, was less ready to offer prescriptions for the future than to defend what has been done thus far, especially including the 2003 and 2005 upzonings that allowed for buildings up to 12 stories tall from Warren to 20<sup>th</sup> Streets, leading to a surge in new construction.

"A few years ago, a forum like this would have been unthinkable," observed Kapur, who pointed out that 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue was chosen for upzoning not just as a trade-off to protect the low-rise brownstones to the east but because it was seen as an ideal "growth corridor" for a city in need of vast amounts of new housing: "120-foot wide with a subway, 15 minutes from Manhattan."

But even Kapur suggested that what has happened thus far need not determine what happens going forward. She agreed that many of the new buildings along 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue win no architectural or community awards, but pointed out that their residents represent a large new body of stakeholders who now care very much about what happens along the Avenue and have an interest in shaping its future.

"Regardless of the architecture, the area is better than it was," argued Kapur, "and you have many more people now with a stake in 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue."

Kapur came under mild fire later in the forum, when several audience members asked why the city had not mandated storefronts as part of 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue's upzoning. Kapur responded that the city had offered incentives encouraging storefronts instead of blank walls or worse—the street level garage vents at the Crest, at the corner of 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, have become the poster child for callous development—but that it was not normally city policy to make such demands of builders. Shouts of "Why not?" could be heard from several places around the crowded room.

In answer to that question, 39<sup>th</sup> District City Council Member Brad Lander, who spoke briefly at the end of the forum, pointed out that the way things have been done in the past is not necessarily the way they need to be done in the future. Policy can be changed, he said.

He cautioned, however, "It is easy to come up with good ideas, but harder to organize and build a broad base of support." If people take that next step, he said, "I would love to work with an active community group on the future of 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue."

Lander was echoing a sentiment that pervaded the forum: not only that changing 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue will require getting organized from the ground up, but that it's better to do things that way. That sentiment extended very much to the Atlantic Yards project, whose impending presence at 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue's northern terminus came up in several questions from the audience.

Atlantic Yards is widely seen as a throwback to



the top-down planning of 50 years ago and as the antithesis to the kind of community-based planning espoused at the forum. Lander and Hammerman both argued, however, that if the battle against the project is indeed lost, there is still much that a well-organized community can do to mitigate its worst effects. Atlantic Yards, for example, would be an impetus for even more traffic along 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, increasing the difficulty of its transformation from thruway to livable street.

“The key,” said Hammerman, “is to make sure that we are a strong community that can stand together.”

It won't be easy getting organized, getting political, building a community. After Atlantic Yards, it won't be easy convincing some people that it's worth the effort, that the grassroots stand a chance against the powerful and connected. But there was inspiration in the air at the forum on the future of 4th Avenue, and a definite sense that an important step had been taken toward the transformation of our neighborhood's troubled roadway into something worthy of our love.

—Ezra Goldstein



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**The Park Slope Civic Council**

Organized as the South Brooklyn Board of Trade in 1896, PSCC is one of the oldest civic associations in Brooklyn. We identify and address quality-of-life issues important to the community; create and support projects geared to improving and protecting the neighborhood; and assist local non-profit organizations that benefit those living and working in Park Slope. Our many ongoing programs include the Halloween Parade, the Clean Streets campaign, community forums, and a holiday toy drive. Our annual House Tour raises thousands of dollars for neighborhood initiatives. All are welcome to join. To learn more, go to [parkslopeciviccouncil.org](http://parkslopeciviccouncil.org).

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