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From Prison to Prime Real Estate: Bayview's Future inFlux

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Photo by Scott Stiffler

Public or Private...and landmarked? Bayview's future is uncertain, although it's certainly up for sale.

BY WINNIE McCROY | As Superstorm Sandy filled Bayview Correctional Facility with 14 feet of water, the medium-security prison's 153 female inmates were evacuated to three upstate facilities. A skeletal staff maintains the 550 West 20th Street building, whose inmates never returned from their October 2012 evacuation. With the state likely to sell Bayview to the highest bidder, Community Board 4 (CB4) and local electeds are involved in efforts to save the prime piece of 11th Avenue real

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estate from destruction — and ensure that affordable housing and community use play a part in any future scenario.

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"We want to have the facility there, so it's important to try and avoid having the building be sold the state," said Community Board 4 Landmarks Committee Chair Pamela Wolff. "The governor has wanted to do this long before Sandy came along and gave him t most of the voices in the neighborhood say they want it to continue to be It rained on their parade, but they danced on

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When Sandy hit Manhattan last fall, the inmates were moved to three correct DownTown EXPRESS states were transferred to Taconic Correctional Facility. But there was no such luck for the 35 inmates participating in Bard College's

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Cuomo: Must Close Bayview, to Balance Budget

It's not right. It costs too much to run, said Governor Andrew Cuomo of Bayview during his January budget meetings. Calling the prison "poorly run," the governor requested it be closed within 60 days, despite the fact that the prison is a prime real estate location in Manhattan. According to his executive budget, the total staff cost per inmate at Bayview is \$74,385, as compared to the state's benchmark of about \$34,000. Cuomo projects that the prison closures would eliminate more than 432 beds, saving the state \$18.7 million in 2013-14 and \$62 million in 2014-15 if Bayview Correctional Facility is closed and sold.

But the real value of Bayview lies in the real estate it occupies. Overlooking the Hudson River in the upscale neighborhood of Chelsea, the facility that once existed "on the backside of hell," as Wolff put it, is now one of the most desirable areas in the city, right between the High Line and Chelsea Piers. "The governor's problem with Bayview is that it is expensive to maintain, and in truth it does cost more per prisoner than most by double," said Wolff. "And there it sits, in the hottest real estate plot in Manhattan." The prison is currently owned by the New York State Urban Development Corporation, the state's chief economic development agency, doing business as the Empire State Development Corporation (ESD). The area is zoned for a mix of development, including offices, hotels, retail, entertainment and residential apartments.

Bayview also lies within the rezoned Special West Chelsea District, which provides incentives for developers who create affordable housing at the site. "There are a number of provisions that we would very much want included in any RFP for the facility," said State Senator Brad Hoylman. "The focus is affordable and/or supportive housing — possibly with a re-entry component to make up for the loss of this facility — re-use of recreational areas by community groups, and preservation of this historically significant building." Bayview sits next to a new luxury condo building that sold at a record high for the area of about \$1,850 per square foot early last year. One apartment in the building, designed by award-winning French architect Jean Nouvel, hit the market at a whopping \$16.9 million. With the governor's decision to shutter Bayview, community board members, block associations and neighbors are resigning themselves to the fact that the prison is gone for good. Now, they are trying to preserve the historic building from being razed by luxury developers. In a June 10 email, a spokesperson from Governor

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Cuomo's office told Chelsea Now, "The decision for an appropriate re-use of Bayview Correctional Facility, a state-owned building, will ultimately lie with the State. Empire State Development will work with a number of other state agencies and stakeholders to identify the best way to transform this facility into an opportunity that will create jobs and economic opportunity or better serve the community."

CB4 Wants Landmark Status for Historic Seamen's YMCA

CB4 has drafted a letter for the building's façade to be protected by the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), and elected officials are eager to be part of the decision-making process about the building's future. "I understand that the building is to be decommissioned by September 1. That means shutting off the gas, water and electricity, thus starting a new chapter for the building," said Hoylman. "I and other elected officials have urged Empire State Development to include us and CB4 in the discussion about the future of the building." Hoylman's office organized a recent tour of the facility for CB4 members and elected officials, including representatives from the offices of Speaker Christine Quinn, Assemblymember Richard Gottfried and Borough President Scott Stringer. Among the CB4 members who attended the tour was Housing, Health & Human Services Committee Co-Chair Joe Restuccia.

In addition to Wolff at Landmarks, he lent the support of his committee to Agenda Item 28, which was discussed by the full board at its monthly June 5 public meeting. The draft of the letter, meant for LPC chair Robert Tierney, forcefully urges that the site be designated as a New York City Landmark as soon as possible, noting that, "If ESD goes forward with the sale, current development pressures in Chelsea will almost certainly result in demolition of the building and its replacement by as large a building as zoning will permit on the site." The letter cites the excellent condition of the exterior and the historical value of the building as "a significant reminder of the era when the Port of New York was one of the world's busiest and the section of the Hudson River between Christopher and 23rd Streets was the heart of the busiest section of the Port of New York."

"We voted to ask the LPC to consider it for Landmark status, and it was placed on the Housing committee's agenda for June," said Wolff. "Some board members expressed the hope that it could stay a correctional facility. They seem to think it was well run and, amazingly enough, they liked it being there. It is not often that people who live next to a correctional facility want to keep it." That outcome seems highly unlikely, as the state will ultimately decide what becomes of the property. "The closure of this facility," Hoylman noted, "was included in the budget that passed in March, and that will not be undone." If the LPC agrees to consider the building for Landmark protection, the interior can still be converted as developers wish — but the exterior will remain the same. "The façade of the building has not been modified since 1931, except for the addition of fencing on the rooftop recreational area for prisoners," said Wolff. "So the state can sell it and do whatever they want to the interior, but they can't mess with that facade. Landmarking it will freeze it in place. If we can do that, there is a chance that some public good will come of whatever the building gets turned into."

Bayview's Closure Affects Marginalized Women and Families

Bayview Correctional

Facility was the only women's prison inside New York City, and now 40 percent of these women prisoners are currently housed at Albion Correctional Facility — located eight hours from the city. The relocation of these medium-security prisoners to facilities upstate has not only resulted in an end to the rehabilitative work, education and counseling programs, but also caused a great strain for the families of these women.

In her testimony during a state budget meeting, Tamar Kraft-Stolar, director of the Women in Prison Project of the Correctional Association of New York, said that being incarcerated close to home can make or break a family's ability to stay connected. The Department of Corrections and Community Supervision estimates that there are 2,300 women incarcerated in New York state prisons. Nearly half of them (48 percent) are from New York City and its suburbs, and 70 percent have children. An estimated 2,000 New York City kids have mothers in a state prison. "For children, frequent visiting and strong family connections can reduce the trauma of having an incarcerated parent and provide the support they need to become healthy adults,"

wrote Kraft-Stolar.

"For mothers, not receiving visits means not only the devastation of losing touch with their children, but also sometimes losing parental rights to their children forever." Although Kraft-Stolar and Hoylman support closing down prisons, they also agree that closing Bayview will create hardships for families of inmates. "I'm strongly opposed to our State's Prison Industrial Complex, and I support the Governor's efforts to rightsize our prison network," said Hoylman. "But I am concerned about the impacts of Bayview's closure on the underprivileged, marginalized women who were incarcerated there. Pulling them farther away from their families and their support networks will increase the rates of recidivism." Those upset about the closing of the prison include the corrections officers who were hired to work there.

Closing Impacts Local Economy and Employees

After Bayview inmates were evacuated, hundreds of thousands of dollars were dedicated toward cleaning up the mess — and corrections officers thought it would reopen. Discovering that it would remain shuttered didn't go over well with the state's prison guards' union, which has sided with prisoners' rights advocates in praising Bayview's rehabilitative programs, warning of the dangers of warehousing inmates in crowded facilities and expressing skepticism at the governor's plan to close the facility in 60 days.

"Both Beacon and Bayview provide critical alcohol and substance abuse treatment programs as well as work release initiatives," Donn Rowe, the president of the New York State Correctional Officers &

Police Benevolent Association, wrote in a statement. "Closing Bayview would also mean shutting down the only women's correctional facility south of the Tappan Zee Bridge, making it harder to incarcerate women in facilities near their homes," he added. "Since the vast majority of inmates return to their home communities after serving their sentences, we think that would be a mistake."

Rowe said that a mere 60 day warning to workers before transferring them isn't enough time to prepare, noting the burden of uprooting officers from the seven other facilities Cuomo has shuttered since he took office. "You don't want someone working in a stressful job like a correctional facility with these type of burdens on the backs," said Rowe, who warned of returning to the bad old days of warehousing inmates in prisons that were already past acceptable inmate-to-officer ratios. He added that the burden of uprooting officers is compounded because the proposed closures in the governor's executive budget come on the heels of seven other facilities being shuttered since Cuomo took office.

"They are unionized workers, so the fact that the state isn't giving them inmates doesn't mean they should be paid," said CB4 District Manager Robert Benfatto. "They should put them somewhere else." With the shuttering of Bayview and Beacon, correction officers will get reassigned. Sadly, more than 500 of these officers will be pushed further away from their families and communities, and relocated to facilities with a much longer commute. According to Benfatto, although the closing of Bayview hasn't resulted in any significant impact to the local economy, some impact could come from the influx of those women who participated in the work program, as well as the lack of patronage of corrections officer to local eateries and small businesses. All concede that the next iteration of the building will have a significant economic impact in Chelsea.

Building Offers Rec Area Opportunity

All that remains for the Bayview Correctional Facility is the potential for a unique opportunity, as Hoylman put it. This "gorgeous historic building" has almost 100,000 square feet of floor area, and includes a basketball gym in great condition, a rooftop basketball court, a historic tiled pool and a stunning historic chapel used by the seamen. Hoylman has joined with other elected officials in urging ESD to include them and CB4 in discussions about the future of the building. "Frankly, we want the building to remain publicly owned, whether by the state or sold to the city," said Hoylman. "But if that's not happening, the community must be included in plans for future of the building."

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