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Northern exposure: High Line faces threat

BY LAWRENCE LERNER

If you thought preserving the High Line was a fait accompli, think again.

Last Thursday night, more than 150 people packed into Chelsea Market's Community Room to hear an hour-long overview of the public planning process that will decide the fate of the elevated railway's northern end, between 11th and 12th Aves. from 30th to 33rd Sts., where it loops around the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's Western Rail Yards.

The presentation was part of a push by Friends of the High Line — the nonprofit organization that helped transform the rail viaduct into an elevated park — to keep the structure intact as the city prepares

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Board 4 hopes Spirit gives up the ghost

BY LAWRENCE LERNER

It appears West Chelsea nightlife has taken another shot to the chin.

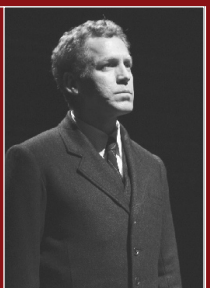
At a full board meeting last Wednesday night at Roosevelt Hospital, Community Board 4 recommended that the State Liquor Authority not approve a transfer of ownership for Spirit, the embattled West Chelsea nightclub at 550 W. 27th St. that was shuttered twice for alcohol and drug violations last spring and summer.

Dealing with the police violations has reportedly cost the club millions of

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Chelsea Now photo by Jefferson Siegel

Cutting the ribbon for Hudson River Park's Chelsea North section, from left, Council Speaker Chris Quinn; Mayor Bloomberg; Trip Dorkey, Hudson River Park Trust board of directors chairperson; Governor Pataki; and Borough President Scott Stringer.

Big wheel keep on turning, proud George keep on beach yearning

BY LINCOLN ANDERSON

Amid unseasonably balmy weather and with a towering waterwheel spinning lazily next to them, Governor Pataki and Mayor Bloomberg joined other officials and community members Monday in cutting the ribbon on the Hudson River Park's latest addition, the new Chelsea North section.

The ceremony was held 500 feet out in the Hudson at the end of the new Pier 66, where the stainless steel waterwheel, one of two public art projects in the new section, turns unpredictably with the current. Called "Long Time," by local artist Paul Ramirez Jonas, the waterwheel hearkens back to the river's milling history. The wheel's artistic shape, its paddles glistening with water, will enhance the view of sunsets from the pier.

The new Pier 66 — the end of which noticeably shifts slightly with the water — also includes a new boathouse for kayaks

and canoes, and will have slips for small sailboats. The short, renovated former B&O railroad float bridge, which once received rail cars on barges floated over from New Jersey, is also in the new \$16 million Chelsea North section. Along the shoreline, the new park segment includes three blocks of landscaped park between W. 26th and W. 29th Sts., with a public-art sculpture, "Tables and Chairs," by Allan and Ellen Wexler, near 29th St.

It was the last Hudson River Park ribbon-cutting presided over by Pataki — champion of the 5-mile-long park project during his 12 years as governor — who only has a few more weeks left in office.

"It's easy to have a vision," Pataki said. "But what is truly hard is to take a vision and turn it into a reality. And that is what we're doing here. It's about this becoming the fabric of the lives of the people of New York — about the waterfront being a

place you can touch and feel and enjoy."

Pataki quipped that the next challenge would be to try to get the waterwheel hooked up to generate some electricity; yet in the calm tide, it was barely spinning.

The governor noted that the old float bridge, known as Pier 66a, had sunk in 1973 and was at the bottom of the river "and now it's back for people to enjoy." Actually, although it's part of the new Chelsea North segment, the float bridge was renovated in 2003 after being raised in 2001.

Addressing the mayor and Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe, Pataki said of the joint park project, "It's been a city-state partnership from the beginning."

Voicing his oft-repeated refrain, the governor said, "I know that someday I am going to be putting my toe in the Hudson

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High Line must preserve union of north and south

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to develop design guidelines and accept requests for proposals (R.F.P.'s) for the Western Rail Yards.

"The process is just starting, and that's why we're trying to get out in front of it, so the city and the Hudson Yards Development Corporation can hear from supporters of the High Line that they want this portion saved and intact," said F.H.L. co-founder Robert Hammond to a roomful of applause.

In November 2004, the city acquired the southern portion of the High Line, between Gansevoort and 30th Sts., from CSX Transportation. In June 2005, the two parties secured approval to include the High Line in the federal Rails-to-Trails program, saving it from the wrecking ball and ensuring its conversion into a unique public space for generations to come. But with the proposed Jets stadium plan recently defeated and the future of the Western Rail Yards in doubt at the time, the city and CSX left the High Line's northern section out of the deal.

Whether the city plans to acquire that portion of the High Line remains unclear. A statement released by John Gallagher, the mayor's first deputy press secretary, said only this much: "Transfer of ownership from CSX to the city of the portion of the High Line that runs over the M.T.A.'s rail yards requires the participation and consent of the M.T.A., which to date has not been received. The city and the M.T.A. are currently engaged in a joint planning process for the rail yards. That process, which seeks to balance a variety of important public priorities, will culminate in review by the City Council."

Gallagher offered no further comment on why the Bloomberg administration is keeping its desire and intent for the High Line north of 30th St. a well-guarded secret.

Meanwhile, this northern section remains vulnerable to alteration or outright demolition, according to Hammond.

"We could see parts of the High Line north of 30th St. taken down, re-routed and put back up, and there are lots of reasons why we think the original structure should remain intact," he said. "One, we think it's a slippery slope once you start tearing it down. There's also no guarantee what you get when it comes back. Do you take off some of the railings and just paste them onto the side of the buildings? To me, that's not the High Line. That just messes with its integrity."

In an interview after the presentation, Josh David, F.H.L.'s other co-founder, offered another, equally important reason for the High Line to remain intact.

"The easement needs to be continuous for the portion of the High Line north of 30th St. to be eligible for the federal Rails-to-Trails program," he said. Achieving that status will enable this northern section to be converted into a public park, as it has been, from 30th St. down to Gansevoort St., according to David.

F.H.L. is all too aware that the Hudson Yards redevelopment process is about to pick up steam. During the next six months, Hudson Yards Development Corporation will develop planning and design guidelines for the Western Rail Yards, and will solicit R.F.P.'s for two months thereafter. After the M.T.A. evaluates the proposals, a



Above, a schematic rendering showing what W. 30th St. might look like with the High Line's northern section redeveloped as a park. The view is looking west. On either side of the High Line, projected new development is shown. Below, an aerial map showing the High Line, with its northern section, in red, wrapping around the M.T.A. rail yards.



selection committee will choose the winners, who will then subject their plans to the city's uniform land-use review procedure, known as ULURP, which includes an environmental impact assessment. The plans then go through a public review process before being kicked back to City Planning for final approval.

According to David, the next three to six months are critical.

"We're arguing that preservation of the High Line should be in those guidelines not only to ensure its integrity into the future but so developers have it in mind as they submit their R.F.P.'s," he said. "Let's not wait until the public review process to ensure the High Line is preserved. Its requirements need time to be considered for it to work successfully in any grand development scheme, and we'll miss a significant amount of planning time if we tack it on as an afterthought."

F.H.L. also believes that keeping the northern section of the High Line standing makes good economic sense for New York City. John Alschuler, a real estate and public policy consultant who has worked with

F.H.L. in the past, made the organization's case at Thursday night's forum.

"In 2002, my firm, HR&A, did an economic feasibility study to convince the city to save the High Line. The city has invested \$100 million in the structure, and we projected the city will reap more than \$250 million in incremental additional tax revenue over the next 20 years due to increased land values around the High Line," he said. "That's a good investment, and it means the city has more money to put into public services. Therefore, it only makes sense for the city to get the High Line's full value by connecting it together with the northern end."

Alschuler insisted that the High Line is also helping the City's land owners, such as the M.T.A., by making its land more valuable to the tune of \$75 million to \$100 million, money it can put into the subway, Metro North and the Long Island Railroad.

"The High Line is a win-win-win. It's good for the city and, therefore, the community, as well as the open-space park system and land owners," he said. "It is

a rare example when everyone's interests come together nicely."

The northern end of the High Line is also special for a number of other reasons, according to Alschuler, David and Hammond.

They stress that the old rail viaduct occupies a critical location, a place where a number of other open public spaces come together in the network stipulated by the Hudson Yards rezoning plan — including Hudson River Park and the park area slated to run midblock between 34th and 41st Sts. The High Line, they add, will also connect major civic facilities, such as the redeveloped Javits Center and the new Moynihan Station, while knitting together the West Chelsea and Hudson Yards districts.

Finally, the Hudson Yards portion of the old railway constitutes 31 percent of the entire High Line, a fact few people are aware of, said David.

"And from an urban design perspective, its length and incredible views of the Hudson River make it unique," David said of the northern portion. "The fact that the High Line is elevated makes its views unparalleled."

And for David and his colleagues, preserving the High Line as a historical marker is also crucial, especially as it relates to New York City's past urban-planning fiascoes.

"The High Line is irreplaceable," he stressed. "Once the Hudson Yards is redeveloped, there will be no trace of its 100-year history except for the High Line. That means the High Line has the potential to function as important historical context for the newly developed area."

"Amid all this, it's important to remember we have a sad analogy only a few blocks away in the 1965 demolished Penn Station," David continued. "That is a glaring example of poor urban planning that I hope we don't repeat here."