

Before the Committee on Corporations, Authorities and Commissions and
Committee on Tourism, Arts and Sports
New York State Assembly
February 2, 2006

STATEMENT ON
THE EXPANSION AND RENOVATION OF THE JACOB JAVITS CONVENTION CENTER
BY
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MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD 4 AND THE
JAVITS CENTER COMMUNITY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

My name is Walter Mankoff and I want to thank the Committees for inviting me to participate in today's important hearing. I wear a number of hats. I am a former Chair of Community Board 4 which covers the West Side from 14th to 59th Streets and presently serve as Co-Chair of its Chelsea Preservation and Planning Committee. I am also a member of the newly created Community Advisory Committee for the Javits Center project. Lastly, together with much of the Board 4 leadership, I am a founder and member of the Hells Kitchen/Hudson Yards Alliance.

My colleagues and I are strong supporters of a world class convention center for our City. It can be a major mainstay for our economy. A properly sited and designed center can also enhance our neighborhood. Our position on this matter is one of long standing. We have all been aware of the problems associated with the Javits Center in its first 25 years and had hoped that its expansion and renovation would be an opportunity to make much needed correction. Sad to say, the present plans suggest that this opportunity is being lost.

This is not our opinion alone. With each passing day, more and more knowledgeable individuals and organizations are voicing similar criticisms. Senator Schumer and the Regional Plan Association are but two recent examples. Some supporters of the latest plan acknowledge that it is defective, but say a bad plan is better than nothing. We disagree. We are emphatic in our position that the quick fix, the bargain solution and a badly compromised plan is not the way to go. We regret that the Javits Development Corporation has taken this route.

The "new" Javits Center will be with us for the next 25 years. It is urgent that we get it right. We believe that it is possible to build a "new" effective Javits Convention Center without undue delay if the parties work together to that end. For example, features that have been the subject of a prior EIS can be used to cite one possibility.

Let me point out some of the major shortcomings of the Rogers, Fowle, Epstein plan.

- It is far too small. The plan provides 35 percent less meeting room space than the earlier design. This fails to correct what has always been a major flaw in the Javits design. Prime exhibition space – on one floor and contiguous – will also increase far less than originally called for by the Javits Center.

- It further isolates the community from the river. The earlier plan for a 39th Street passageway to the river has been eliminated by the positioning of a 6 story marshalling “yard” at the north end of the building. Closing 39th Street and turning 40th Street into an avenue long wall between two garages will suffocate the development of the Hudson River Park and block access to the ferry terminal. It may even violate the State’s coastal zone regulations which require access to the waterfront.
- It blocks future expansion. It takes a leap of faith to believe that the marshalling yard can be converted to exhibition space at a future date. The proposed sale of the 33rd/34th Street block for mixed development eliminates any chance for expansion to the South. The only expansion route left is skyward, a very weak proposal given the penchant for one floor show space.
- It represents piecemeal planning. The block between 33rd and 34th Streets should not be developed as an isolated island. Proper planning requires its consideration in conjunction with the rail yards. There is also a need to view this development in the setting of the entire Hudson Yards project since it will obviously be competitive.
- It is delay prone and financially risky. A change in use from the originally proposed park to mixed development between 33rd and 34th Streets will call for new environmental studies and very likely be a source of major delay. It is also a risky way for Javits to raise needed construction costs given the uncertainty of the price for such space and an uncertain pace of development, particularly for office space.
- The plan does little to enhance the community. Roof-top or ground level open spaces that might have attracted people are now sharply reduced. The colorful 11th Avenue frontage may brighten the day for convention attendees, but there is little in the plans to attract neighborhood or non-convention visitors. The view from the waterfront is still as depressing as ever.

The most critical problem caused by the rush to get a shovel in the ground, is the unwillingness of the Javits leadership to consider alternate proposals. This is not really for lack of opportunity. Two proposals have been around for a long time. The proposal of the Hells Kitchen Neighborhood Association, recently endorsed by the Durst Organization, has been on the table for over 3 years and was even studied by the Hudson Yards EIS. The more radical “flip” proposal of the Newman Institute has been public for over a year. They are creative plans that deserve careful examination. They have much in their favor. Regrettably, tunnel vision keeps the Javits team focused on its own defective plan.

The Community Advisory Committee feels so strongly that the alternatives must be examined that at its recent initial meeting it unanimously adopted resolutions calling for Convention Center Operating and Development Corporations to examine the alternatives and to compare their features with those of the defective proposal being advanced by Javits.

Both alternatives build on some desirable features: the use of the rail yards for mixed development including convention center, office and residential uses, the creation of open space and less blocking of the waterfront, more efficient and less costly transit to the area to promote development, to name just a few.

Finally, let me offer a few words about the newly created Community Advisory Committee. Community Board 4 has played a key role in the organization of the CAC and we believe it is essential to insure that the community's needs are considered as part of the overall process. We also have much knowledge to contribute towards the design of a better convention center. The Committee has been greeted in a friendly and respectful manner. Our comments were listened to patiently. But there is little sign that the Convention Center corporations view the CAC as other than window dressing needed to conform to statute. Showing us completed plans a few days before they are made public clearly defines our status – see but don't touch. It is essential that the CAC be aware of plans as they are being developed so that comment can play a meaningful role. While our role is clearly advisory, it is also must be participatory.

Your Committees have played a key role in exposing the defective manner in which public authorities function. We urge you to continue your good work.

Thank you.

I will be glad to answer any questions.