

# Flatbush African Burial Ground Remembrance and Redevelopment Task Force

July 21, 2021 from 5:30-8:00pm | Task Force Meeting #6 Notes

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## Agenda for the Meeting

### I. Meeting Summary

FABGRR Task Force Meeting #6 was held on Wednesday, July 21st in the evening from 5:30-8:00pm. This meeting provided the opportunity for the Task Force to 1) to gain clear expectations about the process to date and what's to come, 2) to learn about the Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force from a member, and 3) to hold a meaningful discussion regarding the role and the relationship between the Community, the Task Force, the future Developer, and the city. The meeting included presentations from the City Team (TYTHEdesign and HPD), a member of the Harlem African Burial Ground, Q&A, and full group discussions. 9 FABGRR Task Force Members, along with 5 City agency staff and 3 TYTHEdesign team members were in attendance. The meeting was recorded on Zoom and made accessible to the public via Livestream.

### II. Community Engagement Update Presentation

The TYTHE team provided a community engagement overview that provided a reminder of the topics covered in the three workshops and main feedback themes heard through the discussions facilitated in the breakout rooms. The facilitation team also prompted task force members to begin thinking about the ways they assisted with outreach and detail any methods they contributed through an in-session outreach survey. The purpose of this exercise was to understand more about how the public was reached and to include this as part of the community vision report the TYTHE team is drafting.

HPD then provided a reminder of the project timeline and the milestones ahead. The City team also messaged the change of the final report being changed from a summary of task force recommendations to a community vision report that will document the collective priorities and ongoing considerations community members expressed through their participation in the public workshops and the community questionnaire. The HPD team also discussed how RFP submissions will be reviewed and the selection criteria that will determine which proposal will be the best fit for developing the future project including the additional community engagement opportunities that will be available after a development team is designated.

### III. Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force Presentation and Q&A

Ahead of the Task Force discussion, Task Force members heard remarks from Ms. Sharon Wilkins, a Historical Genealogist and member of the Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force. Ms. Wilkins shared with the Flatbush African Burial Ground Task Force members background on the history of the Harlem site; formation of the Harlem Task Force and the subgroups that have shaped programming and memorialization for the Harlem project; and introduced ideas for details the Flatbush group can start to think through for the next phase of the project, such as additional expertise and community voices the group felt should be included as the vision for the project evolves. Before discussing amongst themselves, FABGRR Task Force members were also able to ask Ms. Wilkins questions about the Harlem process such as how the relationship with the City is managed and how the Harlem group came to the decision to include a housing component within their project.

*FABGRR Task Force members raised the following questions. The responses were provided by Ms. Sharon Wilkins and were edited for better readability. These are in-person responses that are for informational purposes only and are not written in any particular order.*

**Q. Did the Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force assume the mantle of the descendant community? Or were you able to research and identify living descendants of those who were buried?**

Yes, the Task Force represents the descendant community. In our research, we could find people who were buried in variograms, we did find evidence of kinship circles of a family where three generations of that family were buried in the burial ground, etc. Unfortunately, we have not located at this point any actual descendants of those families.

**Q. Regarding the working groups, you said it was formed organically? Was it a situation where the City or specific city departments reached out to the churches, and then the group sprang from there as word got out? Could you give us a little bit more details as to how that working group kind of coalesced?**

During the early years of the Task Force, we had monthly meetings where any and everybody from the community whether it was the community board, or neighborhood housing developments, or teachers from local schools. Then when we started working with EDC, which was a few years later, because we weren't working with them in the beginning. As we started working through things with them, we realized along the way that part of the burial ground laid beneath the 126th Street Bus Depot. So, we started working with MTA to make sure that they knew [about the site history there] and to make sure that they knew that we would want them eventually to come to a reasonable compromise with us because the use of the bus depot at that time was included the oil tanks, and everything that it takes to run the transit system and buses. Eventually, MTA reconfigured and reconsidered transportation needs. By 2015, they decided to close the depot to operations and eventually the MTA would return the bus depot back to the city.

**Q. What was the process for the Task Force to gather feedback from the community in Harlem regarding the idea of this site as mixed-use? How much input were you guys able to receive?**

We had a lot of input. We were very much involved in these discussions about the prospect of a physical memorial including how it might look, what it might contain, and whether it was going to be an outdoor structure. We were very much involved in all of those dialogues and all of those negotiations. Then the city, through the city council and Mayor de Blasio, proposed a plan to build at least 10,000 units of affordable housing. And one of the outcomes was that they would work to create affordable housing in East Harlem. So eventually we were approached to ask if we would consider the burial ground [as one of the locations] and whether the burial ground could be considered as part of a mixed-use development. We deliberated, and I would say we probably also prayed on it and decided that, yes, we would like that opportunity. Since major construction and development activity was going to take place there, it would also leave room for us to have a memorial and an indoor cultural education center. We decided, after much visioning and community engagement, that we wanted to have an outdoor memorial with spaces for contemplation, open space, [theatre] and where other historical activities or cultural events can take place. Then an indoor cultural education center where the history of African people, and free and enslaved Africans, and just African history and in general, could be taught through a variety of different types of programming. For the design phase, we

went through many dialogues and diagrams. We then became aware of a young architect working on the various phases of his degrees, very talented. We were able to get him a small grant from the city council that was used to for him to begin creating a diagram [that could reflect our ideas for the memorial]. In the beginning, some of us were wedded to just this design, but eventually realized that we needed to leave room for other ideas from the development team to come into play, because there may be some really creative, thoughtful, respectful ideas to enrich the memorial in the cultural education center, that we may not have thought of.

**Q. Was there any pushback or opposing views regarding affordable housing that came from the Harlem community? If and how they were engaged, was it a decision that the Task Force made? How do people work through opposing views and reach consensus?**

Oh, yeah. There always will be pushback; it's just human nature. Some of it came from the concern about affordable housing and others were concerned about it being a mixed-use space. We came to an agreement, that the programming would include workforce development for low-income individuals and commercial uses. For the affordable housing, we came to understand that it had to be split between units for low-income families and market rate. The decision of the percentage breakdown between affordable housing versus market rate was not made by us. But for those of you who don't know how this works, in various developments you must have some market rate units to help fund the affordable housing.

Just like you, as a community we were wrestling with whether housing was a good fit for this project. You have to think of your other goals and objectives, and how that can help get this memorial done and so that our ancestors and forebears can be honored for their tenacity and their skill and their untenable sacrifices that went into building this city, this state and this nation. It was also important that we were involved in highlighting the importance of how these stories are told and why they need to be told. If it is not told that the African experience, the Black experience is part of American history, there is no authentic telling of American history. So, when you begin to outline the larger overarching goals and forming a vision for where there can be memorialization, education, and positive social interaction, then, the thought process becomes "how do we do this?" For us it meant that we were going to join and be part of a set of programming that involves mixed-use spaces.

**Q. Did the Harlem Task Force have the ability to have some input on this RFP? What are we looking for? And what requirements are we putting around a developer?**

Sure. One of the things that may need to happen, if it hasn't been thought of already, is to see if the skill set you need is available on the Task Force. If not, maybe reaching out to a school of architecture or urban planning, to [identify someone or a group who can] help the Task Force formulate ideas around what the memorial looks like and how it is it will be configured. Also, be thoughtful about including space for scheduling town hall meetings, testifying before the community board, and other opportunities that will foster continuous research, collaboration, and communication, because you will find that you may increase the professional services that may come to you. And you may be able to help in increasing the ability to define what the ultimate objectives are, and also the ultimate design.

## IV. Discussion Reflections: Role and the Relationship between the Community, the Task Force, the future Developer, and The City

To support the FABGRR Task Force's discussion regarding the role and the relationship of the many stakeholders, TYTHEdesign asked the Task Force several questions as conversation starters. The following is a summary of these discussions, based on the prompts asked by TYTHEdesign.

### **What does successful and transparent communication look like between the Task Force, the Community, the City team, and the future Developer?**

#### Transparent communication

- Transparent communication needs to be two-way between the Community and the Developer and City. It is not just having the Developer tell us (the community and Task Force) information, but also really listening to the community and asking for information back.
- Be accountable for your decisions and communicate them clearly.
- The city needs to be accountable and transparent for how decisions are made, how processes work and are politically pressured.

#### Be respectful in seeing the project as more than just a building

- The Developer must acknowledge the history of Flatbush, including the burial site and the descendants, as well as the opportunities and challenges within the context of this neighborhood.

#### Create authentic community engagement

- It is important to slow down the process to ensure that all community members have time to share their perspectives. Make sure the decision makers, (including the Council Member, the Borough President and Mayor, existing and new) really listen to what the community is saying.
- Moving forward, make sure to have wider community representation when planning for the memorial site.
- If housing is being built on this site, we need a deep understanding of community needs for housing and how this project is responsive in addressing those needs.

### **Looking forward to the next phases of the project (pre-and post- developer selection), what opportunities do you see for the role of the Task Force?**

#### Support in the development of the Request for Proposal (RFP) and selection of developer

- Support in the development of the final Community Vision Report to make sure it 'really' reflects what we heard.
- Task Force members must play a significant role in the development of the RFP and ensure that M/WBE (Minority- or Women-owned business) or non-profit developers that are mission-driven are prioritized.
- The City should make the vetting process more transparent and include the Task Force in the decision-making process.

#### Engage the youth

- As we are low on youth perspectives on this project, we need to bring in more of their voices specifically.
- Engage youth in High School, college, or identify another opportunity to engage youth to help us visualize opportunities for the memorial and the open space.

#### Education, awareness, and celebration

- It is critical the Task Force continues to engage in educating the public about what is happening.
- Work with the local schools and incorporate this site's history into fourth grade social studies, if not other classes.

- Engage the community in different ways to foster increased engagement in the future. Make outreach more varied by prioritizing hardcopy mailers, phone calls, and other traditional methods, as this community may not be as digitally connected.
- The Task Force should work towards celebrating the project, specifically the memorialization as it goes from stage to stage. There has been a lot of discussion regarding educating the community on the site's history - especially youth - so we can start the process early leading up to celebrating the actual opening.

#### Holding the developer and the city accountable

- Using the Community Visioning Report, hold decision makers accountable to make sure development plans represent the goals and vision of the community. Make sure there are ongoing check-ins so that the final development details are not different from what the community expressed it wanted.
- Educate the Developer and the City about what the community wants. Use the Task Force to support in reflecting and digesting the lessons the community is teaching.

#### Safeguard the memorialization as a primary priority

- Protect and ensure that the memorial is not an afterthought. The vision of the community must be respected, and the site must not be desecrated.
- Ensure that the Developer and the City are proactive in planning for future site maintenance.
- Ensure the history of the site reflects both the African Burial Ground and the education history of Flatbush, as they both are critical to the story of the site.

#### Build a legacy

- Build a legacy that is an innovative approach to how projects like this are historically approached. This project should result in tangible results that are reflective of restorative justice, transformational housing and overall disrupts a 400-year history that continues to impact those formerly buried here and their descendants.
- No matter what it is called, a task force, a working group, a steering committee, it does not mean as much as what we do.

#### To sustain the Task Force, a budget is needed

### **The FABGRR Task Force, as a group, are currently representing the “Descendant Community.” Moving forward, should this still be the role of the Task Force?**

#### Task Force should remain the descendant community

- The Task Force should remain the descendant community, but not in its current group configuration. We are not a strong representation of the descendant community that we are discussing.
- Due to the lack of biological kin, the Task Force is acting as a surrogate community or custodians. Task Force members here, have an interest in safeguarding the legacy and history of the group, even though some of the members may not be part of the African diaspora.

#### Explore sub-groups

- Not all members of the Task Force feel they can speak of the experience of or can identify as a member of the descendant community. As a result, there should be a sub-group that represents the descendant community. This sub-group would strictly focus on honoring of the site history, memorialization and sensitive handling of human remains as the project continues to develop.
- Sub-groups could also be created to support education or other topics.
- Kickoff the descendant community with members of the Task Force who self-identify while expanding to new people.

**Looking forward to this next phase (and long-term) how can the Task Force be more inclusive? What skill sets, expertise and/or community perspectives do we feel are important to include in the Task Force?**

To broaden our perspectives and be more inclusive

- Some religious institutions, community groups, block associations, and elected officials should be included in the process. The representation should be of people who represent the community and not based on individual opinions.
- We must continually educate ourselves on the different organizations and perspectives within our community.
- Each Task Force member should continue to prioritize the effort for this to be a community led process that is open and inclusive to the various perspectives that is part of this community.

## V. Questions and Answers

*During the meeting, FABGRR Task Force members raised the following questions. The answers are a summary of what was shared through discussion and Zoom Chat by the City Team. These are in-person responses that are for informational purposes only and are not written in any particular order.*

**Q: The community engagement period between January and May 2021 was a time of extreme trauma, competing priorities, life and death decisions. During that time, people were focused on vaccines, health, wellness from social, emotional, mental and physical. Looking at the timeline and understanding that the next chance for community engagement will not coming until after the selection of the Developer is a missed opportunity. I would make a very strong recommendation that there's an extended community engagement period into this fall of 2021. I think all of us are experiencing the opening of our city, and people feeling more comfortable. We owe it to ourselves and owe it to our community to really give them an opportunity to be a part of this community visioning for what happens next. What is the opportunity to extend the community engagement timeline?**

What you said was spot on! It was and continues to be a strange time. And I think we all experienced that. The fact that we're all on zoom in this call right now is an indication of where we still are. The current timeline for designating a developer reflects a typical RFP process. Seeing as this project is not typical and requires much more careful consideration of the various details and sensitivities, the HPD team is continuing to think through how community engagement can be ongoing even while an RFP is out. To reiterate from the earlier presentation, the second half of our community engagement process will be a marked difference in terms of who would be involved at that point and its purpose. Ahead of the project entering the (Uniformed Land Use Review Procedure) ULURP process, one of the tasks the designated Development Team will be responsible for is continuing engagement and ensuring that their proposal is feasible and, most critically, reflective of community priorities. In order for that to happen, it will require that community engagement be an extensive process to ensure the future project includes the various community needs and desires that are expressed through this and future opportunities to engage.

**Q. I don't think that at this moment in time that this project is a usual project. This is a very unusual project. This Task Force has been put together because of the uniqueness of this project. And we have been meeting for the past six months, we've had a number of community meetings. And I think it is very much premature for an RFP to be put out. I think that before we do anything, that there needs to be a hard pause and a complete stop to any further development until we actually get the feedback from the community. I don't think that we should go any further until we actually see the report. Because I don't think that as a Task Force, we are doing justice for the community. If we continue on as business as usual, if we're really not hearing from the community, then it's basically hearsay. We're not being transparent, we're not being honest. And as a Task Force member, I think that I cannot continue to work in the community, if I'm not speaking for the community. Is it possible to pause completely, until that report is done given that all Task Force members must review it and engage the community again?**

We appreciate your perspective about the project. We do think that doing a memorial that does justice to the history and provide affordable housing and future youth services can be achieved here. That said, we value

and recognize that not only do you have the opinion that this site should only be a memorial, but certainly we have heard that from a number of folks in the community. HPD continues to communicate these concerns to both to the Councilman and City Hall, and are continuing to try and make this project be reflective of what we're hearing from the community.

In terms of process, this report will be shared with the Task Force, as well as the public before an RFP is released. HPD will not move forward with putting out the RFP before the report is finalized, and there will be an opportunity for Task Force members to have some input on the final content of the report, before it goes out to the public. And the public will also have an opportunity to react to the content, although that timeline will be much shorter. Then even after the RFP is out, and because that document will explicitly ask that developers not include a design for the memorial, there will still be a lot of time once a development team is on board to do community engagement in support of designing the memorial uses, as that is still very much a community-based process that is not determined by the development team.

**Q. What was the goal for the number of responses to the questionnaire?**

There was not a specific number goal for the community questionnaire responses. However, when comparing it to other HPD processes, the number of responses exceeded the amount we generally see at this stage of a process. That said, we focused our goals on representing voices from all ages and demographics of the Flatbush community. It is important to know, that doing this engagement almost fully remotely was a learning opportunity for the City Team and we understand the limitations that came with facilitating this process in that fashion. As a result, we've tried to tailor the engagement process to be responsive and adaptable to the needs of the moment in spite of COVID and in interest of continuing to ensure that this part of engagement is reflective of what the community needs and its desires.

**Q. Looking to the next phase of the process, regarding ULURP, will both CB17 and CB14 go through the same process?**

The direction that we'll probably go in is that the community board preference will be split between the two boards, 14 and 17. But in terms of which board will be part of the ULURP process, my understanding is because the site is in CB14, that board will represent the community board vote. However, from an engagement perspective, because of the proximity of CB17, we felt it was important that both boards play a role as task force members. This is an important project, regardless of what street or what frontage is located. And as you know, history does not respect boundaries or political jurisdiction. As a result, the engagement process that's going to proceed, aside from technical points, is meant to encompass a broader area, not one community board versus the other.

**Q. To ensure this represents the voice of the current community, will the developers be of minority descent, specifically African descent, and what is the city's process? What is the policy regarding that the developers are people of color or women?**

Across the board on our projects, we have an equitable ownership requirement, which was just implemented late last year, to ensure that at least 25% of the development team is an entity that's either a nonprofit, or an M/WBE, minority/women-owned business enterprise. As you know, the RFP is still being written and we can explore the option of the Developer being specially a Minority Owned Business (MBE).

**Q. What is the timeframe for the Task Force, through the developer selection until the building is built from today?**

The timing for the Task Force is mostly up to the group. To clarify, the post-designation timeline starts once a development team is selected. We anticipate the Task Force being at the forefront of the continued engagement that the development team will lead to design the memorial space and programming. It is also important to keep in mind that the memorialization design will need to be on par with the pre-development process required to program the affordable housing and youth services, as all three components will be under review in the ULURP process. Beyond that, we'll have to continue to work with this Task Force to understand how engagement will be facilitated beyond that point and once the project is ready for construction.

## VI. Next Steps

To close the meeting, TYTHEdesign presented the next steps and expectations for the FABGRR Task Force related to the development of the Community Visioning Report. The next Task Force meeting will be held in September 1st. This meeting will focus on the review and discuss the draft recommendations with the Task Force before we share them with the public.

## VII. Attendance

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organizational Affiliation</b>
Carol Reneau	Community Board 17
Kathy De Meij	CAMBA
Lauren Collins	Flatbush Ave. BID & Church Avenue BID
Natiba Guy-Clement	Center for Brooklyn History at Brooklyn Public Library
Naima Oyo	Ifetayo Cultural Arts Academy
Ron Schweiger	Brooklyn Borough Historian
Ryan Lynch	Office of Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams
Samantha Bernardine	Erasmus Hall High School for Youth and Community Development
Tyrone McDonald	Neighborhood Housing Services of Brooklyn CDC Inc. (NHS Brooklyn)
<b>New York City Agencies + Partners</b>	
Lena Ferguson	NYC Economic Development Corporation (EDC)
Perris Straughter	New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD)
Josh Saal	New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD)
Uriah Johnson	New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD)
Amanda Sutphin	New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC)
Kristina Drury	TYTHEdesign
Claudie Mabry	TYTHEdesign
Hillary Clark	TYTHEdesign