



## Staten Island Advance

### A vision for Staten Island takes shape

Group gathers ideas in brainstorming sessions across the Island

Sunday, December 21, 2008

By PHIL HELSEL

STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- More than 460 Staten Islanders had their say at this month's borough-wide brainstorming sessions run by the Vision for Staten Island group, generating about 1,600 suggestions that ran the gamut of better roads and more buses, to a summer reading program to boost proficiency test scores.

So what's next? Even more polling.

"When you're trying to improve something, the first thing is to envision what you want. There's a lot of open questions on Staten Island," said Jonathan Peters, a professor at the College of Staten Island (CSI) and the transportation expert for the organization. "It's not short-term."

The nonprofit group spent a week questioning Islanders at "visioning" meetings all over the borough, but through January it will be reaching out to groups it knows it missed: Immigrants, twenty-somethings and the lesbian and gay community.

Those who did attend the public free-for-alls that wrapped up last Monday had plenty to say, if much of it was familiar: Fix traffic; more buses, especially late-night; put an end to overdevelopment and, as the borough grows older, give seniors affordable housing.

Some suggestions were specific, such as an indoor running track, a cultural center on the South Shore, and a summer youth reading program for third-through-eighth-graders to boost school proficiency test levels.

By March, the Vision group hopes to hold "reality checks" with industry experts to see which ideas are doable, followed by another round of work groups to whittle down goals into something that can be presented to politicians and government.

"That's one of the things people don't get -- they say, 'Oh, 1,800 ideas, how are you going to do all that?'" Vision for Staten Island executive director Adena Long said. "There are certain things that are going to flow to the top."

Other topics at the top of Islanders' lists were "smart" traffic lights and the ability to (legally) turn right on red. They also called for new light industry and living-wage jobs, and better health-care options or a public hospital. And as unlikely as it is, a subway tunnel beneath the Narrows or to Manhattan remained wildly popular.

The group hasn't rated or even pored through the collected suggestions yet, saying that doing so would "short-circuit" the process. In June, it hopes to have all the data collected, fact-checked and ready for a large public meeting during which participants will vote on priorities.

"That's an easy trap to fall into, which is to say, 'Let's start working with the data,'" said Patrick McDermott,

a business executive and president of Vision for Staten Island. "This is a gigantic project."

Vision is funded through a \$225,000 donation by the Staten Island Foundation, and CSI is paying its rent at a South Avenue corporate park in Bloomfield.

The company in charge of the "visioning process" is ACP Vision+Planning, with offices in New York and Columbus, Ohio. It says it developed plans that led to construction of a \$45-million freshwater aquarium in Chattanooga, Tenn., a regional community festival planned for Knoxville, Tenn., and development plans in Oxford, Ohio, and Fort Wayne, Ind. The company also played a role in the effort to rebuild the World Trade Center site in Manhattan.

Jay Welchun, 28, was one of the few younger people who attended meetings last week and said that the draw of other boroughs has already caused many of his former classmates to leave Staten Island. He doesn't see what any of the visions presented last week will do to change that.

"It's no one's fault that we're so far away," the Grymes Hill resident said. "If you can pay \$300 more a month and live an hour closer to where you work and blocks from where you socialize, I think that's reason to go."

Many others struck up a more optimistic tone.

"It was a good beginning," said Randy Ashenfarb, 50, of Prince's Bay. "Now we have to work on getting people to listen."

Phil Helsel is a news reporter for the Advance. He may be reached at [helsel@siadvance.com](mailto:helsel@siadvance.com).

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