




Staten Island Advance

Permission to dream

Can private-sector wishful thinking undo a municipal legacy of neglect, inept policies and bad ideas?

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By **MICHAEL W. DOMINOWSKI**

STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- Happy thoughts. Positive thinking. Pie in the sky. Imagine! Imagination can be an escape or a useful tool. But such idyll musing and daydreaming can easily run amok and be mistaken as a substitute for thinking grounded in reality -- which it is not. So I quickly run short of patience when public officials foist off their vain brainstorming as, ipso facto, good public policy.

What is so rare as a good idea from the pinnacles of municipal power? It depends on whose agenda is being served -- yours or theirs. If municipal responses to problems sometimes seem obtuse or illogical, it may be that our leaders either don't know how to address the issues -- or simply do not want to.

Never mind the whole of Gotham, Staten Island alone is rife with dumb ideas that somehow became real and great ideas that were strangled, either because they didn't fit into the agenda du jour of the powerful, or those in a position to make public policy have a chronic lack of foresight or ... imagination.

Some recent Staten Island examples: Serious crime spikes; we get a parking-ticket blitz.

We want less traffic; we get a hopelessly flawed "congestion pricing" scheme.

We seek help for our dangerously overcrowded hospitals; we get a weekly visit from the Health and Hospitals Corporation's traveling Pill Mobile.

We want an effective recycling program; we get a counter-offer of 6-cent plastic grocery bags.

Here's a memo to the clueless: These municipal responses are about revenue, not problem-solving or quality of life or the environment.)

We vote -- twice -- to limit the number of terms these elected geniuses can serve in office; we get an overreaching mayor with a messiah complex who, aided and abetted by a self-interested, largely bobble-head City Council, overrules our decision.

Just when you despair of any public-policy thinking that cannot be generously described as any better than vapid, along comes an outfit like "Vision for Staten Island," a grassroots think-tank with the sole purpose of coming up with good ideas and testing them in the fire of public enthusiasm.

The group is an assortment of business leaders and community organization volunteers and professionals and clerics and folks from any number of other walks of life. The Club of Rome it ain't: VSI has no pipelines tapped into the big power. It has no authority or political standing -- or even any discernible political backing. (This is not surprising when you consider politicians tend to see themselves as the visionaries at the center of the idea vortex, and all others as usurpers.)

Unlike the electeds, cloutless VSI has only the power of the jawbone. So the group intends to throw lots of ideas at the proverbial wall and see if anything sticks. The focus may be fuzzy but the group has a \$500,000 Staten Island Foundation grant and no shortage of enthusiasm for the experiment. If nothing works, the VSI bylaws require the group to be dissolved after five years.

For a half-million dollars, this group got permission to dream.

You could argue that the foundation's money might have been better spent on projects with predictable outcomes. Then again, who knows what amazingly great, compelling, destiny-changing ideas may spring from what VSI calls its "visioning process." At least they'll do no harm. The same cannot always be said of the dismal and sometimes downright dim-witted ideas we've been stuck with over the years.

The fate of the Island's rail system is a particularly egregious illustration:

Staten Island lost its North Shore railroad line decades ago. It went away when the city was bamboozled into a privatization scheme with a company that really wanted to run buses, not trains. The fact that the right-of-way still exists owes much to the efforts of a few committed citizens, and a hefty dose of political inadvertence.

Efforts to restore the rail link, which rolls along Staten Island's persistently shabby Kill van Kull waterfront, past junkyards and cement plants, a road salt dump, a defunct, asbestos-laden gypsum plant and any number of other eyesores and environmental outrages, have gone on almost since the trains stopped.

What should be done with that former ribbon of effective transportation? Restore the trains? Establish light rail or trolleys or dedicated bus lanes or some sort of a pod car system? Chuck it all and build an esplanade?

Some would rather line the shore with residential towers and be lucratively done with it. Serious thinking on the subject still hasn't progressed to anything resembling a consensus. Meanwhile, despite study after study, bits of the banks of the right of way are washed into the Kill van Kull every day.

Go to the North Shore Staten Island community of St. George and pick any direction of the compass. You will see examples of municipal malfeasance; they are all around.

The National Lighthouse Museum: The politicians snatched it from other applicant communities that really wanted to build a museum; they stuck it in the abandoned Coast Guard Station, hard by the east side of the ferry terminal in St. George, and then abandoned it.

The museum, which could have anchored the so-called St. George renaissance is instead bereft of funds and political support, and is all but lost. The city Economic Development Corp., which is controlled by the mayor, has thwarted any hope of progress because it wants to see commercial development at the site, not some tourist-magnet museum that's going to be begging for funds every year.

The St. George ferry terminal: The city has been actively pouring money into that white elephant for more than a quarter of a century. Beyond the soaring and swoopy, if otherwise functionless, steel arch, there's some new tile work and paint, and a million-dollar fish tank, but the eclectic hodge-podge of dysfunctional architecture that is the terminal seems doomed to remain a Third-World transportation experience and an inefficient eyesore. Anywhere else it would have been torn down and properly redone.

All the while the traffic pattern at the Richmond Terrace end of the terminal's traffic ramps is preposterous almost to the point of impossible. If you haven't tried negotiating your way around a few of its many permutations, the exercise is a worthwhile, if risky, eye-opener. It would be a great joke, if only it were funny.

The St. George "renaissance": This is a cover phrase for the return of runaway development. The defining community of Staten Island's North Shore is not just the nexus of public transportation for the whole of the Island, it is awash in potential and history, and faded elegance and charm.

One major piece of the renewal could be the St. George Theatre, an astonishing, ornate and irreplaceable baroque treasure from 1929 that private hands saved from the urban planners.

The city's response to this success story has been to begin building a multistory courthouse across the street, over a potters field, on 65 percent of the only parking lot within reasonable walking distance.

Meanwhile City Hall rammed through a rezoning move that will allow developers to replace St. George's hillside waterfront charm with 20-story silos full of people wealthy enough to pay for the view the city stole from the established neighborhoods.

Renaissance indeed. Boondoggle would be more like it.

The St. George baseball stadium: Speaking of boondoggles ... a relatively few years ago the piece of prime real-estate west of the St. George ferry terminal was an unholy mess: An abandoned railroad yard, it had been turned into a down-at-the-heels parking lot for ferry commuters.

Generations of city politicians assured us that the property was privately owned and nothing could be done about this most prominent of Staten Island eyesores.

Then-Mayor Rudy Giuliani, who is bonkers about the New York Yankees, determined to build a minor-league stadium on the site. Decades of legal hurdles vanished with dramatic speed and tens of millions of dollars later another eyesore -- this one made of bricks and steel -- hunkered its bulk down on this bit of the waterfront, a home for the Staten Island Yankees.

The Penn League "Baby Bombers" use the stadium less than three-dozen nights a year, oftentimes playing to an acre of mostly empty seats. As one Staten Island politician later told me privately "It was the best we could do."

The 120th Precinct NYPD stationhouse: Across Richmond Terrace from the baseball yard, the one-two-oh-oh headquarters has been on the replacement list since before the grandfathers of some of today's perps were locked up in the holding pen there. (The occasional "perp walk," a photo-op that occurs when alleged "perpetrators" and other miscreants are trundled off to their court appointments, is a long-standing tradition at the 120.)

Whenever the construction date nears, the city always finds a budget reason to delay the project. The cops have turned that blighted neck of Richmond Terrace into a de facto double-parking lot, forcing eastbound motorists on the busy street to make do with one lane. I wonder if the driver points it out when the Gray Line trolley hauls tourists past the area.

The Stapleton waterfront: Not far down the Island's East Shore from St. George is the community of Stapleton, a hapless collection of neighborhoods that have suffered at the hands of the city's power players. The old shipping docks, built there and in neighboring Tompkinsville as a political sop to the Island early in the 20th century, have long since rotted away. They served the Navy during that century's first big wars, but were never used for commerce.

During the late 1980s the Navy was forced to build, on the Stapleton waterfront, a berthing homeport it didn't want for an obsolete battleship it didn't need. When the political winds changed, the Navy went away and so did the battleship Iowa. The city took ownership of the site, a collection of ugly metal buildings and a long concrete pier, and the place has been disintegrating ever since.

The city EDC, always with the grand, developer-friendly revenue schemes, ousted a paying tenant -- a movie studio -- citing a litany of trumped-up complaints. What the Economic Development Corp. wanted to do was turn the place over to developers who would make a fortune building housing and retail space.

It hasn't worked so far because some of the property would have to be set aside for public use (The public? Remember them?). That turned the developers off; the fortune to be made wasn't big enough. Since then the real estate market has landed in the tank, so the future of the place remains uncertain.

Even without getting into the concentrations of homeless shelters and drug clinics and proposed unsupervised halfway houses for violent, deranged, drug-addicted ex-con pedophiles, the examples go on and on:

-Fresh Kills Park: We were promised the Fresh Kills landfill would be open for a couple of years; it stayed

for 50. We were promised it would eventually become a park. Ah, but when the time came for the park, Borough Hall wanted to see three four-lane highways built through the area. Some park that would be.

-The Rosebank power station: Rushing to a dubious conclusion based on carefully selected and hastily assembled "facts," the state decides Staten Island needs another power station. This one would be largely automated; the generator would be spun by a large jet engine that would start on its own and would scream and roar like, well ... a jet engine. The state's estimable logic dictated not only that the plant should be located near rows of comfortable early 20th century houses in one of Staten Islands oldest and heretofore quietest residential neighborhoods, but that it should occupy a dominant spot beside the community's waterfront.

-The Amundsen Trailway: It would connect Great Kills Park to the rest of the Island via the Greenbelt. What a wonderful unifying legacy! That treasure would be the completion of a vision that goes back to former Staten Islanders Henry David Thoreau and Frederick Law Olmsted. Borough Hall sees it as a local street.

-The New Brighton Village Hall: It was a beautiful landmark that had fallen into disuse. The city ignored it until it crumbled, then finally tore it down.

-Sailors Snug Harbor: Only a concerted grassroots public effort, spearheaded by the Advance, rescued this incredible jewel, with its campus of Greek revival buildings, from being leveled by condominium builders with the blessing of a neglectful City Hall.

-The South Beach railroad right-of-way: It's gone, long since occupied by a row of houses. The city EDC sold it to developers.

-Historic Richmond Town: Imagination-free city officials see this living-history museum not as a tourist attraction and a desirable resource for the mid-Island communities, but as a vexing traffic problem they have yet to muster the political will to resolve.

-The Brookfield landfill: Located between the Historic Richmond Town area and Richmond Creek, athwart part of the Greenbelt in this beautiful mid-Island valley, the callously mismanaged place has been closed for decades and is still so toxic it must be guarded night and day. That is the extent of the ingenuity the city has expended on the situation so far. Clean it up? Not anytime soon.

-The traffic mess (Oh, moan, oh, groan, oh woe is us): NASCAR planned a \$600 million speedway and retail complex on more than a square mile of land it owns, tucked away in an unpopulated corner of Staten Island in an industrial area the site developer had to first clean up. The company was even going to build ferry docks and its own highway ramps to and from the Goethals Bridge.

The city's visionary response to the plan? They summarily killed it, saying they didn't approve of "the process." One of our illustrious local politicians went so far as to goad attendees at a public hearing with false claims and his hostile stand on the project. He ended up in a headlock by a burly union boss.

In the end, traffic concerns were the official reason the project died, although it appears personalities and petty jealousies may have also played a role.

If our highway infrastructure is so hopelessly inadequate, how about we build it up a bit? The problem with that, beside the usual hand-wringing over budget funds, is that the traffic mess is a regional problem, and public officials seem incapable of regional thinking.

The Port Authority and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority are supposed to be doing that sort of thinking, but whatever those secretive societies actually do, it doesn't ever seem to resolve any of our traffic concerns. Toll increases on Staten Island bridges don't go toward better highways and bridges, they go to subsidize other politically pet projects such as the PATH and Long Island Railway train systems -- things Staten Island motorists cannot use.

If this ridiculous no-can-do logic is followed, it means Staten Island can never contemplate a big economy-boosting project if people might drive to it.

Just watch. If the Port Authority likes the idea of a warehousing complex or an expansion of the Howland

Hook container port at the former NASCAR site, you may be sure it will happen, and traffic concerns begone. No matter if it puts thousands more trucks on our highways and bridges around the clock. (Remember that NASCAR would have held three major events a year at the proposed speedway ---- affecting maybe three of the 52 weeks in the year.)

Can the visioning volunteers of VSI do better than this sorry mess? How could they not? The group will be spending the first days of December holding public meetings to collect ideas and dreams: Yours, maybe. We're not getting our hopes up about how all this will play out, but it promises to be an interesting and, as nearly as we can tell, unique exercise in perhaps finally enlisting meaningful public participation in the future of our borough.

Michael W. Dominowski is the editor of Perspective.

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