



Staten Island Advance

Put on your thinking cap, it's raining ideas

Sky's the limit as Vision for Staten Island begins a week of brainstorming

Tuesday, December 02, 2008

By PHIL HELSEL

STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- The call was for any and all opinions on how to improve Staten Island, and the more than 100 residents who showed up at a St. George church last night didn't hold back.

The silly -- a borough-specific currency, a program to promote more smiling in public -- mixed with the serious at the borough's first in a weeklong series of "visioning" forums put on by a non-profit two years in the making.

The group, Vision for Staten Island, is proud of its public-brainstorming approach to solving the pernicious problems that have bedeviled Islanders for decades. Too often, it said, residents bring their complaints to community board meetings, only to leave feeling ignored.

While the approach was different last night at the Brighton Heights Reformed Church in St. George, many of the complaints -- miles of gritty and ugly waterfront, traffic-choked roads and little to attract or retain young people -- were familiar.

"That's the point: We're going to get people from all walks of life and you're seeing the same ideas," said Adena Long, executive director of the group, which plans nightly forums through Monday. "I think it's going to surprise people, how many similarities there are."

The 106 residents who attended last night's session were ranged into groups of about nine each, and took turns volunteering the ideas they think would make the borough a better place to live a decade or more from now.

The suggestions ran the gamut, from a Grant City woman demanding that something be done about young people prone to using the "n-word," to a tunnel beneath the Narrows to Brooklyn.

Jay Welchun, 28, just wishes his entire generation hadn't moved away.

"Something has to be done to stop the brain drain, especially with young people," said Welchun, of Grymes Hill. "There's a whole strata of intelligent people I grew up with who are nowhere to be found."

Other suggestions that appeared, in some form or another, on the sheets recording nearly every group's ideas were allowing drivers to turn right at red lights in more locations, more and better public transit, including North Shore rail service and increased ferry service, and the realization of the Lighthouse Museum in St. George.

How much good any of this does remains to be seen.

The group will put every suggestion made at this week's meetings on its Web site, www.sivision.org, by

month's end, and in June wants to hold a massive "Congress" at which Islanders can vote on the final agenda via electronic devices.

It hopes the flood of ideas -- the Staten Island sawbuck and smile campaign included -- will be fact-checked and winnowed by experts into a blueprint for action.

Morna Murphy, a native of England who has called the borough home for seven years, didn't hear much new at last night's meeting. Frustration brought her there. Frustration and hope.

"In Staten Island, they do studies and they promise they're going to clean this up and build this, and then they pull the rug out from under us," she said. "I guess you just keep pounding away, and hope someone listens."

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