
September 4, 2002

From Graffiti to High Hopes for a Desolate Area

By RACHELLE GARBARINE

Paul Travis recalls that the thought first struck him as he was driving along the Major Deegan Expressway and glanced at a graffiti-scarred warehouse: despite the look of the building and the ones next to it, the site — in a Bronx neighborhood that is technically part of Manhattan — could be a prime retail location.

In the two and a half years since then, Mr. Travis, a principal of Kingsbridge Associates, a Manhattan development company, bought not only the warehouse, which was formerly used by Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center to store medical records, but also five smaller adjacent commercial structures.

The plan is to replace all six buildings with a 230,000-square-foot retail center, including a Target department store, on 9.45 sloping acres alongside the Harlem River and adjacent to the Major Deegan Expressway and West 225th Street, which becomes West Kingsbridge Road in the Bronx.

"If you look at the boroughs, the West Bronx and Upper Manhattan is the single most underserved area for retailers and commercial uses," Mr. Travis said. "It's a totally unmet market."

The site, he added, is near mass transit stations as well as major roadways, and 350,000 people with median household incomes of \$53,000 live within a mile and a half of it.

Construction of the \$80 million development in the Marble Hill neighborhood is expected to begin in November and finish by spring 2004. It will include three one- and two-story buildings and house up to 16 stores, all with separate entrances facing West 225th Street, as well as a small amount of office space.

The Target store, with 120,000 square feet, will anchor the complex. The other tenants, including one restaurant, will occupy spaces ranging from 2,500 to 35,000 square feet. There will be parking for 809 cars.

The Target store will be the first outlet in the Bronx for the Minneapolis-based chain, which has two stores in Queens and will open one in Brooklyn in October. Douglas Kline, a spokesman for Target, would not comment on the planned Bronx store, saying only that his company's policy was not to discuss a store until "often after construction has begun."

The Bronx borough president, Adolfo Carrión Jr., confirmed, however, that Target was the anchor. He said the overall project, which was reviewed by Community Board 7 in the Bronx, had been "received relatively well" by residents.

"There will be some impact," Mr. Carrión added, referring to traffic. "But in the end the pluses outweigh the minuses." He said the project would also generate 600 retail jobs.

Walther G. Delgado, executive director of the nonprofit Audubon Partnership for Economic Development of Manhattan, which serves Marble Hill, added that the project would "help spark a renewal of the desolate area."

Faith Hope Consolo, vice chairman of Garrick-Aug, the Manhattan retail brokerage firm, said that having as strong a tenant as Target would be important to the development's success.

The neighborhood's commercial district is centered on Broadway, which has such chains as Stop & Shop and Loehmann's, the clothing retailer. Both are on the northern end of the Broadway shopping area.

Mr. Travis said, and Mr. Delgado agreed, that the proposed center, designed by Greenberg Farrow Architecture of Manhattan, would anchor Broadway's southern end. The added hope, both men said, is that it will encourage people to remain in the area to shop rather than go to Westchester County or New Jersey.

Financing is coming from the developer's own equity, a loan from North Fork Bank and the tenants.

Though Mr. Travis would not disclose rents, he said they would be competitive. Ms. Consolo said annual rents for stores in the area now average \$20 to \$30 a square foot and could go to \$40 to \$50 a square foot when the project is completed.

Building on the site involves several challenges that added four months to the construction schedule and 10 percent to the cost, said Jeffrey M. Brown. He is president of the Manhattan company bearing his name that will construct the project.

For example, because the site is along the river and because century-old sewers run beneath it, some 1,300 piles must be driven to support the structure.

Other challenges include cleaning the site of contaminants and the existing buildings of asbestos, a process that has been completed.

Technically, part of the new shopping center will be in Manhattan. The Marble Hill neighborhood is geographically in the Bronx, but through a twist of history it is politically still part of Manhattan. The twist was the filling in of the former Spuyten Duyvil Creek after the digging of the Harlem River Ship Canal in 1895, a process that detached Marble Hill from the rest of Manhattan and connected it to the mainland.