

\$500k for Community Plan

Will Von Damm Family Contribution Overcome City's Delays?

By Jason Greenberg



The GREC Community Plan would provide a 10,000 square-foot senior health facility, 90 units of senior housing, and 175 units of affordable family housing.

A development proposal for a long-dormant portion of the site of the former Greenpoint Hospital Campus recently received a shot in the arm thanks to a \$500,000 private donation from the Von Damm Family Foundation.

The money was donated to St. Nicks Alliance, part of the Greenpoint Renaissance Enterprise Corporation (GREC), a longstanding coalition of five neighborhood-based organizations that has put together a community plan for the site, which comprises around 40 percent of the campus. The community plan calls for the creation of affordable housing, senior housing, and a comprehensive senior health clinic. Since May 2007, the city has been deliberating this proposal and others, a lag time that represents the longest the Bloomberg administration has ever considered a Request for Proposals.

This Greenpoint Hospital RFP was drawn up by the city as part of the 2005 Williamsburg-Greenpoint waterfront rezoning. As part of that rezoning, the city committed to fund the creation of 1,800 units of affordable housing on city-owned sites within Community Board 1 like the Greenpoint Hospital Campus. To date, only 16 units have been built while other projects within CB 1 requiring city funding have proceeded forward.

Many feel the decision to put it out for RFP was driven by political – and not community – priorities. Unlike in most communities, the city has rejected community involvement in shaping this RFP.

Members of the GREC coalition – which has been advocating for the community vision to be built on the site since 1985 – believes their proposal is by far the most responsive to community need. Specifically, it calls for a comprehensive 10,000 square-foot senior health facility that would help replace the benefits of the original hospital, whose 1982 shuttering coincided with the opening of Woodhull Medical Center. As such, the GREC proposal is the only proposal that includes a senior health facility. To meet the acute community need for affordable housing, the proposal calls for 90 units of senior housing and an additional 175 units of affordable family housing.

Said Tish Cianciotta of the Concerned Citizens of Withers Street, one of the five groups that comprise the GREC coalition, “We’ve been fighting for 27 years to have housing and health care services on the Greenpoint Hospital site. Now the Von Damm family Foundation grant could finally help get us there.”

In late December, the coalition held a press conference at the Greenpoint Renaissance Center (2 Kingsland Avenue) announcing the donation from the Von Damm Family Foundation, a private foundation founded by Henry Von Damm, a community benefactor and founding St. Nicks Board member who passed away in 2004. Von Damm also helped found the East Williamsburg Valley Industrial Development Corporation in 1982.

His widow, Mrs. Louise Von Damm, said at the press conference that, “We made this major contribution because St. Nicks has been so successful in building housing and providing care to the elderly for the past 30 years. We feel this project is so important to the community and the people we love.”

Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez, who attended the event, expressed confidence that she could help obtain some \$10 million in 202 financing from the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for the senior housing development. “The federal government is sending money back to communities for applications, but we [the city] haven’t presented enough applications that are good and competitive. I know that St. Nicks has put together the best application. No one knows better what works here than the people that live here.”

Michael Rochford, Executive Director of St. Nicks Alliance, said, “Our proposal reflects the community vision for the Greenpoint Hospital site. This donation strengthens our capacity to meet community priorities by developing this site.”

This community vision for the campus began to take shape soon after the hospital closed in 1982. For the better part of the next decade, the site was home to a men’s homeless shelter that eventually swelled to 1,200 beds despite community opposition. After a court order forced the city to reduce the size of the shelter, GREC began to work with the community on plans for a nursing home. But the \$32 million project, which had been approved by Community Board 1 and which GREC was on the cusp of realizing, was scuttled in 2001 when the Pataki administration announced a moratorium on nursing homes. This new

proposal is an attempt to replicate the services of a nursing home and at the same time address the neighborhood's affordable housing crisis.

Diane Jackson, President of the Cooper Park Tenants Association, a member of the GREC coalition, lamented the long delay in developing the campus site

"I can't believe we're in 2009, almost 2010, and we still have this undeveloped property," she said on Monday.

In her testimony before the City Council's Land Use committee earlier this month, Jackson pointedly said, "We're still waiting for the city to create the affordable housing they promised after the Greenpoint Williamsburg waterfront rezoning. They're telling us that development on two of the large publicly owned sites, the old Greenpoint Hospital and a couple of open areas in Cooper Park, is stalled because the city doesn't have enough money. Then why has HPD given a commitment of over \$10 million to develop housing in the Broadway Triangle area, on land which isn't even properly zoned for housing now and where they'd have to push out some neighborhood businesses to make room?"

The press conference took place around the same time as the City Council voted on the Broadway Triangle. The Council approved the proposal 36-10, with 4 abstentions. However, as of press time, a Manhattan Supreme Court justice had issued a temporary restraining order that halts construction on the Triangle until a March, 2010 hearing. The restraining order came in response to a lawsuit filed by the Broadway Triangle Community Coalition, a group of local organizations including St. Nicks that opposes the plans for the Triangle.

Councilwoman Diana Reyna did not attend the press conference because she was at City Hall voting against the Broadway Triangle proposal. She believes the Broadway Triangle proposal was spawned from a politically exclusive process, one she contrasted with the GREC plan for the Greenpoint Hospital site.

"We are confident that the community has presented HPD with an inclusive and transparent plan," she said. "The Greenpoint Hospital process is community-driven and the recent donation is an example of a local investment to our neighborhood for empowerment."

Two of the members of GREC – namely, St. Nicks Alliance and Neighborhood Women of Williamsburg/Greenpoint – have already renovated nine buildings on the campus, creating 45 units of affordable housing and a community center. St. Nicks Alliance has developed 1,800 units of housing in the surrounding community.

Jan Peterson, President of GREC and Director of Neighborhood Women of Williamsburg-Greenpoint, said the GREC plan is the next best thing to the nursing home for which the community had long advocated. "This is a nursing home without walls," she said, adding that it reflected "a vision and community plan for the campus based on community control and priorities."

Henry Von Damm's grandfather started a business on Grand St. in the 1860s. The small business prospered and grew from there.