

BY THOMAS COGAN

During the Queens Affordable Housing Summit held recently, Father Al LoPinto, vicar for human services of the Roman Catholic diocese of Brooklyn and Queens, related a story about a church in Corona. At the church, parish mothers and their kids gather daily while the apartments in which they nominally live are being used for sleeping and cooking by other mothers and their kids. Such extreme time-sharing might be a standard procedure in other parishes and parts of Queens and the other boroughs; life among the poor can be relentlessly pressing. The affordable housing meeting was inclined toward consideration of Queens' middle class, but its findings could be applied to those persons of any economic level who have found it difficult or impossible to afford housing expenses, or who find it daunting to negotiate that grim economic standard known as the market rate.

The Queens Affordable Housing Summit, held atop the Citibank Tower in Long Island City covered topics such as housing trends, development, preservation and, of course, affordability, which was linked with livability. The trends were covered by Brad Lander of Pratt Institute, Rafael Cestero of the city Department of Housing Preservation and Development, John Young of the Department of City Planning and Margaret Chin of Asian-Americans for Equality.

The most significant trend in Queens is growth, which Lander said was 14.7 percent from 1990 to 2000. That left Queens with a population of 2.2 million, a figure that has continued to expand. Lander made an assertion that some might find surprising: Queens has little developable land left. Of all five boroughs, only Manhattan has less. Thus, the housing future looks vertical. Expected in the borough in the next few years are 18,000 units, perhaps the bulk of them in Long Island City, where building by the East River and in Hunters Point has currently assumed awesome proportions. Most will be market rate, and the market expects the traffic to bear a lot, so the result is luxury housing—or terribly expensive, anyway.

But what is affordable housing? Lander cited a “menu of subsidy programs and options” that would “make the bottom line work”. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has determined that affordable housing extracts no more than a third of residents' income. HUD bases most guidelines for affordable housing on the area median income, or AMI. In New York City, it was calculated in 2004 to be \$40,000 annually. Low income is in two phases, approaching \$40,000 and rising from that figure to one approaching \$60,000. Moderate income goes to the mid-\$80,000 level, and middle income from there to somewhat above \$175,000.

Cestero touted Mayor Michael Bloomberg's marketplace plan as addressing the affordability issue. He discussed the city HPD situation 20 and more years ago when it was in charge of a great deal of declining and destroyed housing. The city was fading then, and theorists said it was irreversibly shrinking. Now it is expanding, and new theorists see a city of 9 million inhabitants by 2030. Cestero said the mayor

launched a five-year plan in December 2002, intending to build 65,000 housing units; a figure later increased to 68,000. Not three years later, he declared a 10-year plan for 165,000 units by 2013. Cestero said that 55,000 units should be completed by early next year. The affordable part involves city-owned land. He cited Arverne East in the Rockaways, where a possible 2,200 mixed income units would be built as part of a plan that would preserve the sand dunes there also. He called construction beside the East River in Queens a real opportunity for affordable housing, one that could harness the power of the private market. If funds could be infused for below-market rates, big investors could buy land and include affordable units among the high-price, market rate units. He also cited inclusionary zoning that would involve the building of affordable housing in exchange for density rights. “Arguably, New York has the worst affordable housing problem among U.S. cities, but

development in the Woodside-Maspeth rezoning plan, certainly as a remedy to the infill that has gone on in those places, entailing the destruction of one- and two-family homes and their replacement with multi-family structures that put a strain on neighborhoods ill-prepared for new parking and utilities demands. The plan includes redevelopment of a segment of Queens Boulevard, but the affordability part has been questioned. At present, some 2,300 units are foreseen along the boulevard, but only 60 of them would be in the affordable range.

Margaret Chin called herself an advocate. She was indignant that in Flushing, where she works, many families put more than half their income into paying for housing, which means they definitely can't afford it. She said that neighborhoods in Flushing and elsewhere that would resist an incursion of new housing might accept it if a plan of affordability accompanied it.

Answers To Queens Housing Crunch May Take Some Time



The Riverview apartments in Astoria are one of the newest developments in the area.

the best forces for solution,” he said.

John Young focused on planning in Flushing, Jamaica and Long Island City. He said that the Planning Department uses a three-step strategy: to leverage city resources, deal with outdated regulations and invest well. The department's current interests include development of the streets around the AirTrain that runs from Jamaica to Kennedy Airport and also the Silvercup site beside the East River. At the latter, the plan is to have 150 affordable units out of 1,000. Young said that in future the department should move up from the 15 percent ratio of affordable housing demonstrated at Silvercup to 20 percent. He saw a hopeful

development, she stressed, had to be on a permanent basis, not something that would expire within 15 or 20 years. She found 20 percent affordability an inadequate demand on a building site, calling for 30 percent—or, in the case of Queens West, built on public land, 50 percent. She had no sympathy for developers getting generous tax abatements lasting 15 years. She vowed that whenever she hears talk about development, she will respond with advocacy.

The second panel presented case studies of housing development and preservation. It was moderated by Holly Leicht of HPD, and the panelists were Ron Moelis of L&M Equity, Stanley Natkins, consultant to the

Ciampa Organization, which is family-owned and manages what it develops, and John Kaiteris of the Hellenic-American Neighborhood Action Committee (HANAC) in Astoria. Moelis spoke of his part in building a 466-unit low-rise tower of affordable, or inclusionary, housing upland from a riverside high-rise at the Palmer's Dock Project on Kent Avenue in Williamsburg. “Though I'm involved in the market rate side, I handled the inclusionary,” he said, saying also that he's in business for the profit but believes he can make money and be socially conscientious. He handled the tax credits and funding for inclusionary housing and, fortunately, got a quick response from the city. He made applications in February 2005 and got approval in May. Citibank closed on the land in December. The waterfront access plan for the low-rise sector was presented this past April, and approval followed. The Palmer's Dock low-rise building is classified low- to moderate-income, contains senior housing and runs in size from studios to three-bedroom apartments. He was asked if he believed an upland low-rise and a water-side high-rise were an example of economic segregation. He said that he has found “the economics aren't there” for integrating affordable housing into the higher-priced units. Another inquirer asked how affordability could remain permanent there. Moelis said the city could step in if there were evidence of price inflation, and building ownership is always vetted. There is a covenant also, he said, and the bank is obligated to preserve it. Moelis, who said this was his first high-density project after working on low-density projects in Manhattan and The Bronx, is now working on a project in East Williamsburg. He said he has not worked in Queens. Nevertheless, his Williamsburg achievement provides an interesting example for Queens to consider.

Natkins has worked in Queens. He spoke of Yorkside Towers, a midblock project on Parsons Boulevard in Jamaica, completed in the summer of 2005, after a total of two years' construction. It consists of two buildings, each containing 90 units. There had been little or no development in Downtown Jamaica since the 1950s when Ciampa investigated the possibility of building there. The group could not judge affordability by the rents obtained at neighborhood housing that was nearly a half-century old. Financing from HPD's New Housing Opportunities Program, or NewHOP, which would provide taxable bond financing and second mortgage, was sought. Yorkside residents park in a new public garage that is the beneficiary of 421A tax exemptions. Purchase of the land included buying property rights to a parking lot on the block and building over it while leaving the owner with parking rights. When asked to reveal the rents, Natkins said that studios were going for \$888 per month, one-bedrooms were at \$1,200 and two-bedroom units at \$1,400. Diane Harris, an activist in Jamaica, admired the finished project but said those rents (which were raised slightly when Ciampa got an uptick on subsidies) were not affordable. Natkins called Yorkside “a suc-