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Harnessing Change in Bed-Stuy

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Bedford-Stuyvesant is back.

Or so it seems. With 34.5 percent of the population living in poverty, an unemployment rate nearly twice that of New York City and some of the highest foreclosure rates in Brooklyn, Bed-Stuy seems an unlikely candidate for gentrification. Yet the neighborhood, referred to by the Times of London in 2005 as "a horrible and inconvenient area of Brooklyn with some lovely buildings and a nasty crack habit" is being touted by some as Brooklyn's next hot neighborhood.

Despite or perhaps because of this poverty, Bed-Stuy has had a strong community infrastructure. It is home to the nation's first federally funded community development corporation, the [Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation](#), and has a long history of leadership, community organizing and providing services from within. Now years of public and private disinvestment are slowly giving way to market-driven development, and Bed-Stuy, following a path familiar to many of New York's lower income neighborhoods, is changing.

As this happens, residents and community members are drawing on their strong organizations and sense of community to shape the transformation from within. A handful of local initiatives are already in the works in the hopes that Bed-Stuy can maximize positive development without acquiescing to gentrification. Community leaders are hopeful, but all acknowledge the enormity of the challenge.

"Bed-Stuy has been discovered, like Columbus discovered America," City Councilmember Al Vann has warned, "The rush is on."

Community Visioning Made Real

With so much community capital in place, it is no surprise that Bed-Stuy is one of the communities in New York that has drawn up [its own neighborhood land use plan](#) under the city's 197a process. By allowing neighborhood residents and not city planners to determine the physical future of a place, the plan empowers them to ensure that their concerns, such as increased affordable housing, are addressed.

Initiated by Community Board 3 just one year after the New York Times [called Bed-Stuy "Brooklyn's next investment region,"](#) the 197a helped those living in the community imagine strategies for dealing with market-driven change. Rudy Bryant, former director of the [Pratt Center for Community Development](#) warned that such a plan was necessary to guide the coming development. "If development goes unfettered, Bed-Stuy is going to be a prime target area," Bryant said,

This month, City Council [voted](#) to rezone a 206-block portion of Southern Bedford-Stuyvesant largely in accordance with the community plan. The expansive rezoning fits into the Bloomberg administration's citywide effort to create new business districts in communities with good access to mass transit. The new zoning rules aims to increase density along Bed-Stuy's key commercial corridors while preserving the residential character of the neighborhood's brownstone-lined streets.

The rezoning does not incorporate all aspects of the community plan. For example, the residents wanted increased incentives for affordable housing on several north/south corridors in the area, according to Mercedes Narciso, a planner at the Pratt Center. Overall, however, the rezoning speaks to what the Pratt Center found to be the greatest concerns of the community: increased commercial space to provide economic development and jobs, 400 new affordable apartments and preservation of the neighborhood's residential character.

A BID for Fulton Street

The rezoning is not the only example of community driven processes. As the neighborhood gears up for more commercial space along Fulton Street, the [Fulton-Nostrand United Merchants Association](#), comprised of more than 60 business owners, is pushing for a Business Improvement District or BID on Fulton Street.

Its supporters say the [proposed BID](#) would help diversify the mix of businesses, improve conditions for shoppers and maximize Fulton Street's commercial potential. "The area has excellent access to the city and a great location, but things such as crime and the visual streetscape have kept it from achieving its potential," said Joel Dabu of merchants group. According to Dabu, the BID would address crime and work with entrepreneurs to create businesses that better serve customer needs, perhaps even attracting shoppers from outside Bedford-Stuyvesant.

With the recent rezoning allowing larger commercial spaces, Dabu hopes Fulton Street will be able to attract some national and regional chains such as the recently opened Applebee's restaurant. He thinks larger stores would help smaller, local businesses by attracting more people to the area. Rudy Bryant agrees the area needs more commercial development but added a caveat. "The community would be interested in department stores as long as they're not exploitative big box stores that are going to drive out smaller merchants," he said.

Joe Long, a longtime resident of the neighborhood and owner of Birdel's Tapes and Records, shares Bryant's concern. "We need to make sure minority businesses will still be in the community and be able to harvest the longevity of their time here. We can't let the conglomerates move in on us," he [told AM New York](#).

Dabu, though, sees some change as inevitable. "As Fulton Street gets more successful, of course rents will go up," he said.

Can Development Work for Bed-Stuy?

There are other community-based initiatives. The city's Economic Development Corporation, for example, has launched a pilot program in Bed-Stuy to provide an alternative to traditional economic development. It focuses on comprehensive neighborhood economic development, using the existing community infrastructure to meet the needs for jobs, workers and facilities in the neighborhood.

Today, Bed-Stuy is dealing with issues that have confronted many parts of the city before it. The question is not whether change is desirable -- everyone seems convinced that it is -- but whether the community can shape this change. Can the active residents of this neighborhood promote a new model for development?

Many have concerns. Andrew Fils-Aime of the Pratt Area Community Council for one applauds increased commercial and residential diversity but worries that the new development will not meet the needs of low-income residents. For Fils-Aime, not enough has been done to organize, inform or prepare the existing residents for the changes about to take place in their midst.

But others remain optimistic. "The neighborhood is back," Brenda Fryson of Community Board 3 [told New York Magazine in 2005](#), "and it's not because white people have come here, but because of the tenacity of the people who have lived here all along."

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