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Exclusive: Queens Pilots NYCHA NGO Program For City

BY ARIEL HERNANDEZ
Staff Writer

The New York City Housing Authority's (NYCHA) Next Generation Operations (NGO) program leadership staff took the *Queens Tribune* on an exclusive tour last week through Astoria Houses, which currently is undergoing the most improvements in the city.

The NGO program, which kicked off in July 2016, was created to better target the maintenance needs within NYCHA.



PHOTOS BY ARIEL HERNANDEZ

Astoria Houses, which currently is undergoing the most improvements in the city.

Under NGO, each development in Queens and Staten Island was instructed to establish a model building that is required to reflect exemplary standards to be modeled throughout the property.

"We're looking to upgrade janitorial conditions, so that way you can bring staff to say [that] this is a model building and these are the expectations for our development," said Carolyn Jasper, NGO director for Queens/Staten Island.

Astoria Houses' model building, located at 4-24 Astoria Blvd., had its lobby floor tiles pulled and is currently waiting for contractors to come back and finish. In the meantime, LED lighting was installed throughout half of the building, including the stairwells. All doorways throughout the building were freshly painted. In addition, approximately \$46,000 was funded to replace all elevator floors.

Astoria Houses' super Benjamin Costa said that while the model building could be completed this week, the remainder of the LED lighting has yet to be shipped.

"The problem is that there has been a greater demand in two-foot lights than in four-foot lights," said Costa.

Jasper said that Astoria Houses has been able to get to where it is now with the NGO program by empowering property managers and property maintenance supervisors to operate more independently outside of senior management.

"It's about giving them the tools and ensuring that they have resources to get the job done," said Jasper.

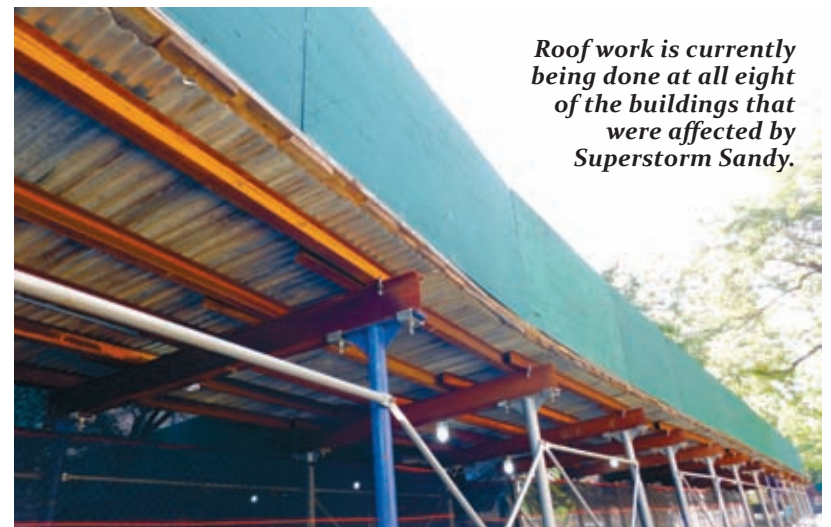
Rather than provide individual training to staff, all property maintenance staff attend the same trainings, such as managing public hous-

es and customer-care classes.

Of all the NYCHA developments in Queens, thus far, Woodside Houses is the one property that has successfully completed its model building.

According to Jasper, the purpose of the model building is to show residents where all buildings in each development will one day be located.

"The thing is, it's a work in progress," said Jasper. "At this time, we may not have enough funding to tile



Roof work is currently being done at all eight of the buildings that were affected by Superstorm Sandy.

each and every lobby floor. The developments have to make decisions based on funding and the other day-to-day needs that need to be met.”

At the beginning of each year, property management and supervisors are responsible for forecasting and preparing monthly spending plans based on seasonal occurrences and specific needs of their development, which is something that was recently put into place by NYCHA.

“Our operating budget is 100 percent HUD [Department of Housing and Urban Development], but since 2001, HUD has not met our 100 percent need, so we have been short for 16 years now and are operating at a shortfall,” said Jasmine Blake, NYCHA’s deputy press secretary.

It is for this reason that Jasper said it is important for residents to pay their rent on time, as this is NYCHA’s primary source of income for operating and renting apartments.

In an effort to use funding wisely, Jasper said that through NGO, generators are being placed on the roofs, so that in the event of another catastrophe like Superstorm Sandy, the development’s source of power will be on the roof and residents will be able to maintain their lights and fuel.

“Everything is going to the roof,” said Rodney Davis, NGO deputy director for Queens/Staten Island. “So, in case of sewage backup or water main breaks, our equipment

is protected and we’re not in a situation where we have to send staff immediately to pump out areas to prevent damage to this equipment.”

By placing all equipment on the roof, Davis said that NYCHA will have better control over how staff use their time during an emergency and ensuring that residents don’t lose their services.

Jasper said that flooding in the boiler rooms during Superstorm Sandy caused residents to be without power for weeks.

As of last week, Astoria Houses had just received a shipment of new gas pipes.

Superstorm Sandy not only affected Astoria Houses’ boiler room, but also damaged the underground trenching and wiring, which became corroded. Since then, wire has been connecting the lights until the new posts and LED lighting is put in place.

Approximately eight apartments were directly affected by Sandy. The residents of those apartments were relocated while NYCHA conducted a full rehabilitation of each apartment. The renovations included new walls, floors, crawl spaces, stoves, refrigerators and cabinets.

With most of the work having been funded and given a notice to proceed, several of the projects are slated for completion by 2018.

The already-renovated basketball court will receive fiberglass back-



Astoria Houses super Bejamin Costa (left), NGO director for Queens/Staten Island Carolyn Jasper (center) and NGO deputy director for Queens/Staten Island Rodney Davis (right) led the Queens Tribune on a tour of Astoria Houses.

boards, with score boards and a track field surrounding the court. In addition, there will be new benches and water fountains placed at the park.

In addition to the installation of new pipelines, LED lighting and floor tiles, roof work is also being completed throughout the development and flood barriers are being placed to protect against storms.

Garbage enclosures will be placed at Astoria Houses, so that staff no longer take the garbage bags from compactor rooms to place in front of buildings, but instead take them to the drop sites—which has thus far encouraged residents to do the same.

“It’s changed the face of the devel-

opment,” said Jasper. “We’re creating clean, connective communities.”

Currently, NYCHA undergoes a seven-day mandate, which is the average of how long it takes for the completion of maintenance work and addressing repairs. Through the NGO program, the average maintenance service level in Queens is currently 3.5 days, while the borough as a whole has an average of 3.8 days. As of August, Astoria Houses’ service levels are 1.9 days.

“Within the past year, we have made tremendous strides,” said Jasper.

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Flagship Diner Fights For Right To Operate

BY JON CRONIN Editor

Briarwood's Flagship Diner, one of the oldest diners in New York City, may face a hastened departure, according to one of its owners.

Since the new owners of the diner's property, Whitehorse Management, had its plans approved for an apartment building in June, the diner's owners believe that they are being forced out of the building, located at 138-30 Queens Blvd. Currently, the diner has until October 2019 to vacate the premises.

According to the diner's owners,

Whitehorse Management is planning to demolish the commercial building and erect a mixed-use, seven-story building. According to the city Department of Buildings' website, Whitehorse Management filed to demolish the one-story building last summer.

Jimmy Poppo, one of the diner's owners, said that he and his two partners have received four "notice to cure" letters since June from Whitehorse Management, in which they have been given five days to fix various issues at the diner and provide proof that they are not in violation of the lease.

"It's a lot of legwork. [The developer] started in as soon as he got his plans approved in June," said Poppo.

Poppo added that he needs to continuously document with photos the progress of the work that was completed or the fact that no work needed to be done and the diner is in compliance with Whitehorse Management's requests. If work was done, Poppo has to produce an itemized list of the work and receipts from the companies that completed the work. Then, the receipts and photos have to be presented in court. Poppo said that all of these steps make it difficult for the owners to operate the diner.

Poppo said that the diner's lawyers have served a "Yellowstone Injunction" to Whitehorse Management that would prevent the landlord from serving more "notices

to cure" on the diner.

The diner is also receiving help from state Sen. Tony Avella (D-Bayside), who plans to attend the diner's press conference at 11 a.m. on Sept. 12, during which the diner's owners will argue that the landlord is taking "predatory action" against the eatery.

The diner also has a petition for customers to sign for the diner to stay open as long as possible. As of Sept. 1, the petition had nearly 2,000 signatures.

Poppo said that with the petition and injunction, "maybe [the landlord] will want to renegotiate."

Poppo said that he and his partners are aware that not everything lasts. The Flagship Diner is running strong today—but, last year, the local media ran with a story that the landowner had sold the property to a developer and the diner would be forced to vacate when its lease ran out in 2019.

"It was like a knife in my heart," Poppo said, and added that he still gets phone calls asking if the diner is open for business.

He added that the diner has more than 35 people working who have been with the restaurant for many years.

"All these people who work here will be out of a job in two years, we're trying to save them for now," he said.

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Jamaica Lot Sees Concrete Plans

BY TRONE DOWD Editor

Last month, yet another development was announced for Downtown Jamaica, bringing in yet another wave of affordable housing options and continuing the renewed interest in the Southeast Queens hotspot.

Omni New York has filed plans with the city's Department of Buildings to develop a long-empty lot located at 92-23 168th St. in Jamaica. Founded and operated by former Mets player Mo Vaughn, Omni New York plans to develop a 23-floor mixed-use apartment building.

According to *The Real Deal*, the New York City Economic Development Corporation reached out to Omni New York for the plans. Final plans for the long-vacant space, which is currently being used as a parking lot for the city's Police Department, had been in the works for years. Under Omni New York's plan, the new development would house just under 400 apartments and in-

clude more than 330,000 square feet. The new project would also feature a space for retail, adding to the already-busy commercial strip along Jamaica Avenue, as well as a space for community use.

The development is one of many to debut in Southeast Queens in the past few years. Earlier this year, a mixed-use apartment building at 164th Street and Jamaica Avenue broke ground. Funded by First Presbyterian Church, the \$74 million, 12-story building will add 174 units to the neighborhood. At 88-45 163rd St., a seven-story mixed-use building will house transitional services for the mentally ill as well as affordable housing. Near Sutphin Boulevard, The Crossing, a 26-story building,

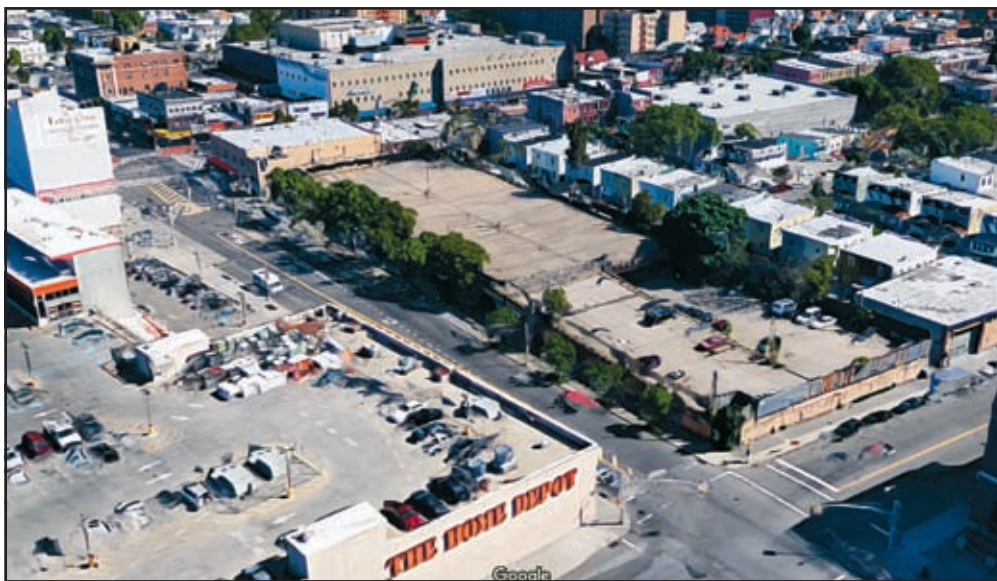


PHOTO COURTESY OF GOOGLE MAPS
Last month, a developer revealed plans for the long-vacant lot located between Archer and Jamaica avenues.

broke ground in April. The \$406 million development will add 669 energy-efficient housing units and 45,000 square feet of retail space.

Jamaica's wave of development is a result of a vested interest by local elected officials and developers alike who are hoping to revitalize

the Downtown Jamaica area. A year ago, Gov. Andrew Cuomo invested \$10 million towards Southeast Queens business outreach. This summer, Mayor Bill de Blasio allocated \$500,000 towards aesthetic repairs for storefronts along Jamaica Avenue.