

MLS to Queens? Stop by Harrison, NJ first

Stadium didn't bring boom times to Jersey town; could harm FMCP

by Joseph Orovic

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The cold gusts of a January afternoon pass The Greenroom in Harrison, NJ as a bartender preps orange and lemon wedges despite what will probably be a slow night.

She surveys the empty tables and desolate bar in front of her as she serves a lone patron a pint. It's usually quiet around this time of year for the bar. "Things get busy when the Red Bulls come play," she says.

To her left hangs a jersey signed by the resident Major League Soccer club's striker Kenny Cooper, #33. "But Januaries ... They are killer."

This sleepy, 1.2-square mile former industrial town along the snaking Passaic River in New Jersey may offer a preview of MLS's enduring effect on Queens should its ambitious home in the borough's largest park come to fruition.

A steadfast belief in the power of soccer itself stands at the heart of the league's pitch for a controversial 25,000-seat stadium in Flushing Meadows Corona Park. And it has also fueled hope in Harrison, which has a history of soccer fanaticism.

MLS's talking points have effectively become part of the discourse — that soccer will provide a boost to the economy, that the effect on the park will be outweighed by the benefits; that Major League Soccer is a good neighbor and will be part of the community, and that the interest in soccer is booming and the borough shouldn't miss out.

To put it succinctly, Queens is being told it needs MLS.

But the reality is grayer. Municipalities like Harrison have experienced a mixed bag of positives and negatives from MLS's presence. And experts say the future of the park is grim if MLS's stadium becomes a reality. The predicted net benefit or loss from the stadium still depends on whom you ask.

Or, in the case of The Greenroom, it depends on the month. Because Januaries ... they're killer, and will likely remain so until the Red Bulls' first home game in March.

Money Talks

Much hinges on the terms of a deal that would have to be struck between the city and MLS for the use of up to 13 acres in Flushing Meadows Corona Park. The league's commissioner, Donald Garber, characterized discussions as "at the finish line" in an interview last fall, but later walked back the comment.

The deal, as reported by Crain's, would give

MLS a 35-year lease at \$1 per year, with no property taxes and no revenue sharing. The league would foot the \$300 million cost of building the stadium itself. MLS President Mark Abbott would not confirm the reported terms of the deal during an interview last Thursday with the Queens Chronicle's editorial board.

"We're going to finalize a deal with the city, but until that, it would be premature for me to comment on what the business terms are," he said.

In exchange, MLS has promised an engine churning out \$60 million a year in economic activity, as well as the rejuvenation of Flushing Meadows Corona Park's existing soccer fields and a "significant" further investment in the park estimated to be "tens of millions of dollars."

And it is in the overlap of land-for-benefits exchanges and a promised economic boon for a jobs-starved immigrant neighborhood that the similarities to a little New Jersey town become clear.

Lessons from Harrison

A floundering waterfront brownfield becomes the focus of an ambitious redevelopment plan calling for a mix of commercial and residential uses.

At the heart of the redevelopment: a 25,000-seat, state-of-the-art, \$200 million soccer stadium, the home of MLS's cherished tri-state metropolitan franchise — a project doggedly supported by the mayor. It's within walking distance to a mass transit artery (the Harrison PATH train stop) and just off a highway, Interstate 280. The plans also included a rejuvenated local soccer field. Starting to sound familiar?

The population of Harrison even has a Latin tinge similar to Corona's, with Hispanics making up 44 percent of the town's population, according to the 2010 Census.

There is also a local history of soccer fanaticism, with some hometown heroes such as U.S. national team member John Harkes playing on Harrison's de facto soccer proving ground, colloquially known as "The Courts," before their careers took off.

When the Red Bulls came to town, the rejuvenation of the fenced-in former tennis courts off Frank E. Rodgers Boulevard was part of the deal.

Red Bull Arena was positioned to be the heart of a boom time for a rejuvenated Harrison. But those times haven't fully arrived, for either Harrison or its businesses.

For taverns and restaurants like The Greenroom, or any number of bars and eateries within walking distance of the stadium, gameday can be

fruitful. MLS last week touted a petition signed by 1,000 businesses across Queens supporting the creation of a stadium, fueled by the belief the economic benefit will reverberate miles beyond the park.

But walk three blocks past the Harrison PATH train stop, where Harrison Avenue feeds into I-280, and business owners casually, and anonymously, tell a different tale. Gameday shows some uptick, but nothing spectacular, they say. Fans catch the game, then catch the train.

The results have been positive on a macroeconomic level for New Jersey, according to James Hughes, dean of Rutgers University's Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy. The net benefit of any structure such as an arena ultimately depends on the number of out-of-state dollars brought in.

"The most beneficial impact would be if most of the patrons came from New York," he said. "If all the patrons are from New Jersey, it's recycling dollars that are already here."

The creation of a competing soccer stadium in Queens may or may not negate that benefit, depending on the Red Bulls' ability to retain their fans, while Queens draws new ones.

"It really does depend on the individual circumstances," Hughes said, adding there are no guarantees.

Know thy neighbor

The league is currently going through the machinations of pre-Uniform Land Use Review Procedure preparations, with a water monitoring kit from eco-study firm Great Ecology sitting alongside the Pool of Industry in Flushing Meadows. MLS has also enlisted ICON Venue Group, HR&A Advisors, SHoP Architects and Langan Engineering to put together a plan — all on behalf of a yet-to-be-named owner.

Legally speaking, Queens residents will have to interact with the franchise owner in the long term, the same way nobody calls Major League Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig's office when there is an issue with the Mets.

Yet MLS has been deliberative in courting potential owners, stating certification for ULURP is its primary goal.

"I fully anticipate that the ownership group here will be of the like of the groups that we have in the league now," Abbott said. "It is a priority to have the best ownership group we can have for this club. If we can accomplish that prior to the commencement of ULURP, that would be great. But if we can't, we're still moving forward with the project."

The implicit deadline for submitting proposals in time to have them approved within 2013 is especially tight, and the stadium is on Mayor Bloomberg's shortlist of "legacy projects" to be completed before his stint in office ends on Jan. 1, 2014, according to the New



Major League Soccer President Mark Abbott.

PHOTO BY PETER C. MASTROSIMONE

York Post. The average seven-month length the ULURP process usually takes means MLS must be certified and beginning the public review process by May 1 if it has any hope of gaining approval during the last days of Bloomberg's term.

"The plan is to continue to move forward with the ULURP process," Abbott said. "Our goal is to move this project forward. That's where our attention is."

A franchise expansion fee would be in the \$75 to \$100 million range, according to various reports. Bloomberg News reported that Abu Dhabi-based Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who owns British soccer club Manchester City, is in discussions with MLS regarding the proposed Queens franchise.

Harrison's fight with the Red Bulls earlier this year illustrates the importance of knowing Queens' soccer owner.

On Jan. 6, a tax judge ruled the Red Bulls owed Harrison \$3.6 million in 2010 and 2011 real estate taxes, which the franchise refused to pay, claiming its property is owned by a tax-exempt redevelopment agency. The club promised to appeal the ruling.

Meanwhile, Harrison's rejuvenation reportedly hit the skids. Developers' payments to the town have slowed to \$1.34 million last year, compared to \$11.5 million when Red Bull Arena was just completed, according to Businessweek. The town had to borrow almost \$3 million to cover debt service on bonds issued six years ago. Its long-term prospects are so dicey, Moody's cut Harrison's credit rating five levels, to Ba3, three steps below investment grade.

Stuttering growth

The reported outsized expansion fee points to growing popularity and belief in the league. MLS also cites solid attendance numbers as assurances it's a sports entity that's here to stay, unlike its failed predecessor, the North American Soccer League. But its finances remain largely unknown.

MLS has expanded to 19 clubs since its inception in 1996. Attendance ranks third among major sports in the United States, behind football and baseball. It has touted club-owned, soccer specific homes as the bedrock of its model — fueling the push for an exclusive Queens home over using an existing site like Citi Field.

It also points to the success of the Seattle Sounders, with a notable average attendance of *continued on page 14*



Red Bull Arena, the promised catalyst of a rejuvenation of Harrison, NJ's revitalization.
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Major League Soccer stadium

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44,000 per game, as proof of the sport's growing popularity. Yet the Sounders share CenturyLink Field with the NFL's Seattle Seahawks.

And as a private entity, the league does not offer dollar figures to vet. Its history suggests a stuttering growth.

In 2002, Garber shrunk the league down, nixing its two Florida franchises, the Miami Fusion and Tampa Bay Mutiny, for financial reasons.

Fewer than one-third of the league's franchises finished the 2011 season in the black, with crown jewel clubs like the Los Angeles Galaxy failing to generate a profit, according to a Los Angeles Times report.

Abbott did not divulge the exact number of profitable clubs, but said the overall standing of the league's franchises has improved since 2011.

"We don't talk specifically about that," Abbott said. "I will say there are a number of teams that don't make money. There are more every year that are."

Park and effects

The expanse of Flushing Meadows Corona Park stands as a testament to the transformative properties of willpower, ambition and development. Few of its nearly 1,000 acres betray its past life as a dumping ground for coal ash in the 19th century.

MLS's stadium at the site of the Pool of Industry has been portrayed as a welcome addition to the park, a private-interest land grab, and all points in between. Groups such as the Fairness Coalition of Queens and a newly created grass roots campaign called "Save Flushing Meadows Corona Park" have led the charge against the project.

The league said it looked at 20 sites around the city, and chose the park because it fit three criteria: it matched size requirements, which include a north-south orientation; nearby transportation and a devoted fan base. It has since been seeking community input on the project.

It must also designate up to 13 acres of replacement parkland for the amount lost to the area. The replacement parkland may not end up in a single plot.

"Whether we get all 13 acres in one location or not remains to be seen, but I think that there's likely to be some portion that would be rather large and some areas that would be small," Abbott said, adding that all the replacement acres would be in Queens, though he could not confirm the league would pay for the land itself.

It has yet to provide assessable figures about the stadium's impact on the park or a rendering with depth of field and proportions that would give a sense of size.

That was by design, according to Abbott.

"The criticism would have been 'Hey, you showed up, you just decided all this stuff and you didn't seek anyone's input,'" he said.

A better picture of the stadium's affect on the park will emerge when MLS submits its draft Environmental Impact Statement as part of ULURP. But a draft EIS submitted by the United States Tennis Association as

part of its expansion plans offers a peek into the soccer stadium's possible effects.

Some procedural hurdles loom. The 6.6-acre Pool of Industry is part of a water management system that controls the flow of water to Flushing Bay and partially mitigates the tide's effects on Meadow and Willow Lakes. Filling it would require mitigation efforts allowing the flow of water to continue.

The water table is also particularly high in the park, which Abbott said MLS will alleviate by building the stadium on an elevation.

Any changes to the Pool of Industry may be subject to oversight and approval of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the state's Department of Environmental Conservation, according to the USTA's draft EIS.

Those approvals would have to come after the project has gained local approval and successfully navigated ULURP.

"There's a very rigorous regulatory environment around the building of this site, and the stadium is not going to get built unless we comply with that, and we're prepared to," Abbott said.

Two former parks employees with long ties to Flushing Meadows Corona Park expressed strong dismay over the stadium proposal.

Arne Abramowitz, the park's administrator from 1986 to 1993, acknowledged the strong role soccer plays in the park, but said a stadium is not a logical next step.

"There's no bigger advocate for soccer than myself," he said. "However, that's recreational!"

The impact on the park would be "tremendous," he added.

Of particular concern is the loss of trees, which the USTA's draft EIS pegs at about 71, a figure which Abbott could not confirm. Though the trees are required to be replaced by law, arboreal growth in park is a dicey proposition.

Due to the park's past use, a thick layer of ash remains below its soil surface, Abramowitz said. Getting a tree to stick is tough, and conditions prevent trees from ever reaching their full size.

"What you won't see in Flushing Meadows Corona Park is giant heritage trees," he said.

The feasibility of a stadium is not the question — it can be built, according to David Carlson, who worked for the Parks Department as a landscape architect at FMCP's own Olmstead Center for 32 years.

"Anything is feasible if you throw enough money at it," he said.

What would be lost, according to Carlson, is the heritage of the park.

"It's the historic core of the park that you have to protect," Carlson added.

This, of course, is not the first time a stadium has been mulled within Flushing Meadows Corona Park. The Jets explored the possibility of building a football stadium there a decade ago.

"Every couple of years, people have great ideas for the park," Abramowitz said. "We don't need their ideas."