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Essex Crossing, a Renewal Project 60 Years in the Making

By HELENE STAPINSKI JUNE 15, 2017

When the first phase of construction is finally finished this fall, the enormous Essex Crossing development will begin to transform the Lower East Side of Manhattan: luxury condominiums, a vast underground market with local vendors, a senior center, a museum, a public park, a bowling alley and the first multiplex movie theater in the neighborhood.

But the biggest draw for New Yorkers is the affordable housing.

In the past two months, over 93,000 people have applied for 104 apartments in one of the planned buildings.

“Ninety-three thousand — that’s no joke,” said Yuh-Line Niou, the state assemblywoman for the district, who has been helping local residents apply for the apartment lottery. “It shows the incredible need here.”

Last fall, Ms. Niou won the seat that a fellow Democrat, Sheldon Silver, had vacated after being convicted on corruption charges. Partly thanks to Mr. Silver, the Essex Crossing site — once known as the Seward Park Urban Renewal Area, or Spura — sat fallow for over four decades, its empty lots an open, nagging eyesore in a diverse, dense neighborhood. Mr. Silver had fought with the community over much-needed affordable housing, worried of losing his Jewish constituency.

But in the last days of the administration of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, a plan was finally announced. Now nine sites are on a fast track. The entire project is

expected to be completed by 2024.

The first part of the project, which broke ground in 2015, will be done this October: a 14-story building near the entrance to the Williamsburg Bridge with 99 units of affordable senior housing, including apartments for as low as \$396 a month. So far 60,000 people have entered that lottery. Also on site is a medical center affiliated with NYU Langone and a community center run by the nonprofit Grand Street Settlement.

Robert Cordero, the executive director of the Grand Street Settlement, said the community was about to undergo drastic changes because of Essex Crossing. “We’re going from litter-strewn lots to the newest redevelopment,” he said. “You can’t solve all the neighborhood’s problems in one fell swoop. But I do feel this is an authentic developer and a true community partnership.”

Essex Crossing, at 1.65 million square feet, is one of the largest developments in the city. Three separate builders — Taconic Investment Partners, L&M Development Partners and BFC Partners — have created Delancey Street Associates to construct both commercial and residential properties. The site will have a total of 1,079 apartments, more than half of them reserved for low- and middle-income tenants.

One of the standout features will be the Market Line, a 150,000-square-foot street-level and underground marketplace, part of which will open next year. After a year of digging on a former tenement site, the Market Line is under furious construction; dozens of workers are building an open space to be used by 100 vendors, including the current Essex Street Market, as well as new fishmongers, vegetable stands, butchers, a beer hall and a wine bar.

Some activists advocated for a simple supermarket for the Asian, Latino and Jewish seniors in the neighborhood. In addition to the Market Line, there will also be a Trader Joe’s on the site.

“Our mantra has always been, ‘If the community shops there, everybody else will shop there,’” said Rohan Mehra, a principal of the Prusik Group, one of the commercial developers. “Markets are typically the most democratic shopping experiences. Everybody shops elbow to elbow.”

The development dates to 1955, when the site was designated for urban renewal. Through the late 1960s and early '70s, tenements were demolished and more than 1,800 families — most of them Puerto Rican — were displaced.

“It was the end of the Robert Moses era and the beginning of the Jane Jacobs community activism era,” said Isaac Henderson, who is managing the project for Delancey Street Associates. “And they met head-on and collided. There were many efforts to develop these sites from the top down rather than from the grass roots up. But that approach didn’t work.”

After years of fighting among Mr. Silver, developers, the city and the community, the fruits of compromise are finally apparent.

The Grand Street Settlement will run not only a senior center, but also a job-training program for younger adults. Families forced out decades ago have been given preferential placement for affordable housing.

Later phases through 2024 will include office space, more condominiums and an expansion to the Market Line, all connected underground. The affordable senior development was added because of community pressure.

“The project is not perfect,” said Ms. Niou, who had hoped for even more affordable housing. “But a lot of good things are coming out of it.”

Correction: June 21, 2017

An earlier version of this article referred incompletely to plans for Essex Crossing. In addition to the Market Line bazaar, a Trader Joe’s supermarket is also planned for the site.

The Particulars

Project Essex Crossing

Site The Lower East Side between Delancey and Grand, and Ludlow and Clinton Streets, and environs

In the works Since 2013, though the history of the project dates back to 1955

Driving forces A cast of hundreds, including community activists, a long line of politicians and commercial developers

Cost \$1.5 billion

Biggest obstacles The project's long genesis and the need to make adjustments along the way

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