

With Wheel, outlets, more, Island will be an 'urban getaway'



By [Rachel Shapiro](#) | rshapiro@siadvance.com

Email the author | [Follow on Twitter](#)

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- Borough President James Oddo, along with the stakeholders of Empire Outlets, the New York Wheel and Lighthouse Point in St. George, and URL in Stapleton are hopeful that the projects will be the beginning of a revitalization on Staten Island and change the way both Staten Islanders and those off Island see what is often referred to as the forgotten borough.

Oddo sat on a panel Thursday evening with Rich Marin, the CEO of the Wheel, a 630-foot observation wheel that is being built adjacent to the Staten Island Yankees stadium;

Joe Ferrara, with BFC Partners, which is building Empire Outlets near the Wheel and Elysa Goldman, project manager with Triangle Equities, the developer of Lighthouse Point, a mixed-use residential and commercial development, complete with a hotel.

Along with them was Marilyn Schlossbach, an Asbury Park, N.J., restaurateur who will open two restaurants in URL in Stapleton, a mixed-use commercial and residential site.

Lynn Kelly, president and CEO of Snug Harbor Cultural Center, moderated the panel.

She recently became the head of the Arts & Culture Committee of New York City's tourism arm, NYC & Company.

The four panelists and Kelly spoke about the ongoing development projects and how they view them collectively as changing the proverbial landscape of Staten Island.

Urban Land Institute New York's Borough Development Series hosted the panel inside the Staten Island Ferry terminal in St. George.

Dozens of people packed the small room to hear about how these major developments will create job opportunities, promote tourism and change non-Islanders' view of the borough.

While Oddo said he wants Staten Island to remain "the cleanest, greenest and safest borough," having the projects come to the Island at the same time, "there's a chance to have a critical mass of young people" and also become a technology hub, **beginning with a newly vacant building in St. George.**

TRAFFIC ISSUES AND CHANGE

Marin, who said he and Ferrara's projects, while separate, have been "married" by the city, sees the Wheel as being "a source of pride" for Islanders.

"There's going to be a little traffic and parking to contend with and that's hard to avoid."

Oddo agreed. But that shouldn't stop them from going after these projects that can benefit Islanders, he said.

Responding to a question from the audience, Oddo acknowledged that no, there isn't a master plan for the projects and the city doesn't have a plan to address traffic before the projects are built.

"We're going to have some infrastructure challenges and we're trying to get a way to mitigate some of them," he said. "I would rather have the infrastructure challenges that are looming, than have a waterfront that is totally underused."

To a Stapleton resident in the audience concerned with changes to his neighborhood, Schlossbach said there has to be "an interface of new and old" in Stapleton.

She noted her involvement in a community planning board in New Jersey that gives feedback on development and suggests changes. She recommended that Staten Island create a group of invested community members who can have input.

WELCOME TO STATEN ISLAND

Schlossbach's interest in expanding her business to Staten Island is in part because "people who are priced out of other boroughs can come here."

Goldman, noting that all the projects are happening at once, said, "We all sort of complement each other." She added, "It's really going to be historic."

Marin recently moved to Staten Island and noted the great location of the Wheel and Empire Outlets on the harbor, being adjacent to the ferry.

"That location has been a huge win for us," he said.

Ferrara, a longtime Staten Islander, said, "millions of people want to visit destination St. George," adding that the outlets have had a lot of interest from retailers.

With all the good things happening, Oddo urged people to stop the "perverse municipal self-flagellation that Staten Islanders do. They love to wrap themselves around the forgotten borough, which obviously is grounded in fact and in history. But it is not an excuse for apathy. So every chance we get to change the impression of Staten Island to the folks off of Staten Island, it's also a moment in time when we can change our view of ourselves."

Marin expects, when the projects are complete, Staten Island will be an "urban getaway" across the water from the city.

"This is something that we are going to be very proud of when it's done," Marin said.

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