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Willets Point can be our Silicon Valley

Silicon Valley erupted in a flurry of emails and blogposts last week after Mayor Bloomberg announced his plans to build an applied science and engineering campus in New York City. The city's issuance of the Request for Proposals sent tremors to the West Coast with a clear message: New York is not after sunshine or grapevines; we are after innovation and industry.

Addressing the Crain's Business forum, Mr. Bloomberg expressed his commitment in no indistinct terms. New York will be the next Silicon Valley and regain its foothold as the innovation center of the world. It comes as no surprise that the mayor has put so much stock into his NYC Applied Sciences initiative; it has the potential to be the crowning glory of his tenure - a transformative plan that will spawn a new sector of industry in technology and engineering in New York City. Universities, too, have taken notice, and 27 have expressed their interest in building a new campus. The mayor deserves to be commended for undertaking such a farsighted plan.

But there's a fundamental issue with the mayor's plan if the goal is to build not just a campus, but an engineering epicenter - an East Coast Silicon Valley that could modernize and transform New York's economy. It's not the costs or the idea itself -

economists, economic developers, and entrepreneurs know the next new growth sectors are in technology.

It's the location.

Unfortunately, the potential sites selected by the New York City Economic Development Corporation lack the characteristics needed for the kind of economic growth this project has the potential to drive. Two of the three locations - Governors Island and Roosevelt Island - are naturally isolated. The last site, the Brooklyn Navy Yard, is equally inaccessible, resting in a congested corner of Brooklyn with little room for parking a car, let alone planting a campus or industry.

Universities and new industries, particularly, require room to grow and to develop businesses and locally-based ventures. That means growth will be based heavily on the availability of office, industrial, warehouse, research, and living space. Neither of the designated island sites would sustain entrepots or entrepreneurs. The proposed site on Roosevelt Island would be limited to a mere 9.9 acres.

In fact, the best location for the site of the mayor's initiative is one the NYCEDC has yet to consider: Willets Point, Queens. It offers an environment ideally suited for the growth of a university and a future technology industry. The 62 available acres make

Willets Point ripe for development, and its position at the confluence of the 7 train, the Long Island Rail Road, 19 buses, four major highways and two bridges make it ideally situated. And it is in the backyard of one of the most easily accessible airports in the country, with another a short drive away.

This means Willets Point is easily reachable from virtually every corner of the tri-state area, and for that matter, the globe. Professors, students, businesses and employers will be able to live and travel from Long Island, Westchester, or other parts of the city within a matter of minutes - 22 minutes with the express 7 train to Grand Central and 19 minutes with the LIRR to Penn Station.

Queens, and the areas surrounding Willets Point - Flushing, Corona, and College Point - also have the space needed for an industry's growth. There are thousands of square feet of available office and retail space, and future projects in the area expect to add significant options for businesses. For example, the \$850 million Flushing Commons project will create more residential units, community and retail space.

This is all in the most diverse borough in New York, where a quarter of the city's population resides. Queens has some of the most active cultural, artistic, and entrepreneurial communities in the country. What's more, its home to countless museums, restaurants, and recreational opportunities, from MoMA PS1 to Flushing Meadows Park. It is this cultural dynamism that will

synergize campus and business communities. Entrepreneurial cultural communities already exist in Queens, and they will be able to cultivate this new innovation center.

For years Willets Point has been a thorn in the city's side, a blighted area in a world-renowned city. Incorporating a university on the site would not be a diversion from the current plans for 35% affordable housing, retail, and open space. New York City is developing Willets Point in phases due only to the limited investment and financing available. A mid-sized university would in turn complement the current plan and would likely speed-up development for a project that has stalled in the past.

We ask that Mayor Bloomberg, the NYCEDC, university respondents, elected officials, and New Yorkers consider Willets Point, Queens, as the site for New York's next new university and technological innovation center. For the enormity of the mayor's vision and plan, the small parcels of land being considered now aren't going to be sufficient to foster this new Silicon Valley. And you'll never be able to get there.

A world-class university at Willets Point is just what the borough of Queens, and the city of New York, have been waiting for.


Feel free to offer us suggestions by emailing Emil@CoalitionForQueens.Org and learning more at CoalitionForQueens.org.

Emil Skandul, 23, of Fresh Meadows, is a member of the Coalition for Queens and works on economic development for City Councilman James Sanders.



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