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News

As Housing Booms, Will Schools Have Room?

by Andrea Bernstein

NEW YORK, NY September 05, 2006 —Public Schools open for the year today. Improving public school education has been a theme of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's tenure. But as more families become interested in public education – and with more and more housing being built – the question of where to place all the children is becoming more pressing. WNYC's Andrea Bernstein investigated. She filed this report.

PS 234 sits across from a tree-filled park, adorned with fountains and imaginative play equipment. The children of Lower Manhattan are lucky to have both the park and the school. A little over a year ago, Mariama James was making preparations to send her daughter Elijah to pre-K at PS 234. Her two older children had both attended.

James: I had already filled out the pre-registration paperwork.

But it was not to be.

James: Sandy the principal held out as long as she could and I believe we got the letter somewhere in June, July, that no, sorry, we're not going to be able to do it.

The pre-K – an optional program -- had to be cut to make room for older students. James scrambled. She couldn't afford a private pre-K in Lower Manhattan. So she ended up sending Elijah to a school 160 blocks away, where she frequently spent the night with her grandmother who lived nearby.

James: Which is pretty, you know, dysfunction, considering we're an intact family and she has two siblings at home.

PS 234 has lost more than its pre-K. The art and science rooms have been taken over for regular classes. Class sizes in some grades have crept up to well over thirty. The school was built for 585 children. About 750 are now enrolled. And more are on the way. In this playground, it's not uncommon to see more than a hundred strollers.

In 1988, when PS 234 was built, about 25,000 people lived in the neighborhood. By 2000, there were another 10,000 residents. Since then? The local community board counts another 15,611 housing units that have been approved. A city planning map concurs. It shows Lower Manhattan as having one of the highest rates of new construction in a city teeming with new housing. That could mean almost triple the population here since the school was built.

All this has left local residents and elected officials wondering where the children will go to school. City Council member Alan Gerson watches with worry as another tall tower rises next to the school.

Gerson: Where is the building? You don't need a formula to tell you that if you're bringing in more units in an area where the schools are already overcrowded you need more schools.

Gerson says the irony of all this is that PS 234 itself has drawn more families to Lower Manhattan. Developers of luxury condos regularly tout proximity to the school as a big selling point.

Because of community pressure, the city HAS promised to build a new school on the east side of Lower Manhattan, and an annex to PS 234 in the new tower going up next door. But Gerson says even that isn't enough.

Gerson: It's clear the moment that school opens it will be filled. The city has made it a policy

to expand the residential base.

The Mayor has made it no secret that he wants to build more housing in Lower Manhattan. He pushing for one of the news World Trade Center towers to be fifty stories of housing.

The Deputy Mayor for Economic Development, Dan Doctoroff says one of his favorite activities is to take long bike rides around the city on Saturday mornings.

Doctoroff: And you cannot imagine the level of vitality and energy and construction that is taking place in virtually every single neighborhood including neighborhoods that had been given up for the dead.

Some of this construction is occurring because of "rezonings" -- allowing developers to build more housing, higher. Some of it is the product of an array of private decisions to build on underutilized land.

In 2005, the city issued permits for almost 31,000 new residential units. That's more than double the new units okayed for construction in the year 2000. Leonie Haimson is head of the group "Class Size Matters." She says school construction is lagging far behind.

Haimson: We're right now in danger of really building more arena seats in this administration than seats for schools.

Haimson says that New York is increasingly enjoying a reputation as a good place to raise a family.

Haimson: One of the good things that's happened is because crime has gone down more and more families really do want to stick around here.

Mayor Bloomberg: Ready: zero, one two, three.

This past summer, the Mayor and other officials shoveled dirt to signal the start of a 1000-unit complex on the Williamsburg waterfront. It's part of a rezoning that's supposed to bring more than ten thousand new apartments to this area. But there are no new elementary schools planned. The proposed Atlantic Yards project in Brooklyn? A potential fifteen thousand new residents. No elementary schools in the initial plan. The Department of Education says these developments are in areas where the schools are underutilized. In Williamsburg, only about 10,000 of 15,000 elementary school seats are filled.

But Matthew Bromm, the vice-chairperson of the Fordham University graduate school of education, doesn't buy it. In the 1990's, he was the head of community school district 27 in Queens. Even then, he noticed a construction boom in the Rockaways, one that continues to the present.

Bromm: And now what you're going to have soon in Rockaway is underutilized schools are going to become over utilized schools.

That is, he says, just what's happened

Broom: And I find it almost amusing that politicians don't think about these things until there's a crisis and then all of a sudden its finger pointing and blaming. There's no finger pointing and blaming. You know its going up, plan for it.

The city continues to insist it IS planning for school population growth. Deputy Mayor Dan Doctoroff says the city is developing a plan to prepare for a population to grow to over 9 million. He says schools are part of it.

Doctoroff: What we've now done is looked at literally 188 different neighborhoods in the city and looked at population projections and even reduced those by age.

But a report by the city's own consultants, George and Eunice Grier predicts a decline in schools enrollment. The Griers have a careful formula for predicting school population.

Eunice Grier: We now get it by community school district.

But it doesn't include new housing starts.

Bernstein: So once the buildings get occupied that's when the population starts showing up in your count? Eunice Grier: That's right. George Grier: Right, yes.

Liz Bergen, Director of Capital Construction for the School Construction Authority, says the

Authority looks at more than just the Grier report. She says it collects data from the city housing, planning, and building departments.

Bergen: And we take that data and break it down and then based on a matrix of pupil throw-off we generate potential elementary, middle and high school pupil enrollment.

Those calculations led to a capital plan that will build 66,000 units by 2009 in districts across the city.

But the Authority's formulas have been wrong before. Just ask the people in Washington Heights. In the 1990's a wave of immigration from the Dominican Republic filled these schools to capacity. They became so crowded they spawned the campaign for fiscal equity, a lawsuit to get more money for city schools. As with PS 234 in Tribeca, the schools lost their cluster rooms where students learn science, art, or computer skills. Josh Karan, a parent activist in the district was so insistent the school construction authority formulas were wrong, he convinced top officials to tour a school. And he showed how they were counting "cluster rooms" as regular classes to beef up capacity figures.

Karan : Their reaction was no, that's impossible, so we showed them where cluster rooms had been taken away, and they said, oh, that's an anomaly, and we went down to the third floor and the second floor, and the first floor. They recognized there was no way their capacity figures for that building could be correct. And what was their response? This is an anomaly. This doesn't exist anywhere else, and they ceased doing the tours with us.

A spokeswoman for the SCA defended the calculations.

Leonie Haimson, the education advocate, says the city needs to get much more creative about funding new schools construction.

Haimson: In other parts of the country, you have a large scale development you either make sure there's a school included or you make the developer put into a fund called an impact fee that will be specifically be used to build more schools.

Oddly, you don't have to travel very far to find something like this. You don't even have to leave the five boroughs. In part of Staten Island, zoning regulations require a developer to certify there are enough school seats before a project can be built.

And then there are buildings like this one, on the Long Island City waterfront in Queens. It's a new 44-story tower, built as the first building in what is expected to be a whole new cityscape.

Gioia: Long Island City along the East River waterfront used to be a Pepsi factory, used to be distribution centers.

Councilmember Eric Gioia, who grew up not far from here, describes the neighborhood.

There are already three tall towers.

Gioia: And then you have a building that's already up that's about to be 25 stories. And as you continue to go north you're going to have somewhere between 6 and 7,000 new units created on the waterfront.

There is also a new school. When they constructed the 44 story tower, they built P.S. 78 on the bottom floors. Gioia says the school anchors the neighborhood, making it a place where families will want to move – and stay. He wants to replicate this in a recent "upzoning" along Queens Boulevard in Woodside.

44: you see all along here. You see this this is an empty lot, an auto repair shop, another empty lot, there's an auto lot, there's a one story building. All of this is going to be transformed.

Gioia says developers will get to build 12 story apartment buildings. He's vowing to negotiate with developers, one by one, if necessary, to put schools in on some of the ground floors.

Gioia: All along here, right here. This is an idea that has occurred around the city, but the Bloomberg administration has no consistent policy of encouraging developers who are erecting new housing to also build schools. We tried to speak to the city planning commissioner, Amanda Burden, to discuss how the city is planning for new schools capacity

Repeated requests were turned down. A top city planning official did speak with us, provided we promised not to use her name. She said the department has begun a series of meetings with the department of education to better plan for new schools. A Department of Education spokeswoman also turned down our request for an interview with Chancellor Joel Klein.

Lehrer: Chancellor Klein, you're on WNYC.

But he did recently make a regularly-scheduled appearance on WNYC's Brian Lehrer show. A listener called and raised what's been on many resident's minds – where children will go to school in a city whose population is approaching 9 million.

Caller: Why would we give a schoolhouse, ever? Klein: There are plenty of facilities in East Harlem, we're building more.

But while Klein was answering, another listener emailed a question.

Brian: Why does the city let developers build without consideration for the school system?

Klein: Well, we're not. In fact it was under mayor's leadership that we have what everybody acknowledges is the largest capital construction budget this city has ever seen. Thirteen plus billion dollars.

But its unclear if even that will keep up with the city's needs. As for the private sector contributing? Mayor Bloomberg has been reluctant to impose too many requirements on developers, for fear the building boom will slow. For WNYC, I'm Andrea Bernstein.
