

BY NIKOLAY DIANKOV

Even in its early days, Forest Hills was a hot Queens neighborhood that always stood out for its charm and beauty. In 1904, Cord Meyer bought six large farms on a hilly tract adjacent to Forest Park, and the name Forest Hills was born. In 1909, the year the Queensborough Bridge connected Queens and Manhattan traffic, Margaret Sage bought 142 acres of land from Cord Meyer and commissioned the design of Forest Hills Gardens. Renowned architect Grosvenor Atterbury, designer of the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., designed the Gardens—a private community with Tudor-style homes, winding tree lined streets and small green parks in between homes. Cord Meyer built the north side of Forest Hills, which is how a community came to life.

After World War II, a number of prominent New York builders like the LeFraks, the Parkoffs and David Minkin started taking advantage of the central neighborhood location. They built large elevated apartment buildings on both sides of Queens Boulevard, the central artery going through most of Queens. Other well-known developers like the Muss family and the Minskoffs focused on the retail and office infrastructure to support fast residential growth. With its central location and excellent infrastructure

Forest Hills, The King Of Queens

from Forest Park and the Flushing Meadows Park nearby, to great transportation including multiple highways, the F, R, G and V and E express subway lines as well as the Long Island Rail Road, Forest Hills was probably the most sought-after place to live in Queens. The neighborhood also secured a place on the U.S. pop culture map when Marvel Comics founder Stan Lee made it a home for his most celebrated character, Spiderman.

The exit of the U.S. Open tennis tournament in 1978—often referred to by New Yorkers as Forest Hills, just like the British Open is referred to as Wimbledon—did not lower the appeal of the neighborhood. On the contrary, the 1980s and 1990s saw ambitious developers like Heskell Elias, Barry and Robert Rothenberg and Joshua Muss reinvigorated the Austin Street retail strip, which spans almost a mile in the heart of Forest Hills. The local community board was instrumental in pushing a strip club named Runway 69 out of the neighborhood. The developers, in turn, brought in chain stores like the GAP, Banana Republic and Barnes & Noble, which made the strip super trendy. In September 1999, as if to confirm the trend setting status in Forest

Hills, then First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton came to the official opening of a Duane Reade store at 107-16 Continental Ave. Capping off the new century were filmmakers who shot parts of both “Spiderman I” and “II” movies in Forest Hills.

So what is happening now in a well-established, mature neighborhood like Forest Hills? In the last decade, the door has opened to many new immigrants. The population of Community Planning District 6, which encompasses Forest Hills and Rego Park, grew by 8.4 percent, or 8,971 people between 1990 and 2000, the last year census data was available.

Councilmember Melinda Katz (D-District 29) has been extremely supportive of diversity and community building. After seeing the influx of immigrants after the fall of the Berlin Wall, she was set on helping them build a community in her district. She has been a major force in helping the fast growing Bukharian population establish a Cultural Youth and Education Center for the Russian Jewry, which will open soon at 98-81 Queens Blvd. “We need to balance economic growth and community needs,” she affirmed. “In some areas on or close to Queens

Boulevard we can upzone, while in the strictly residential areas, we may bring the zoning down from the current R3-2.” Active in the community is also the local Chamber of Commerce, which in the last six years organized a street fair called Festival of the Arts on Austin Street. The chamber also promotes shopping with its www.shop-foresthills.com Web site.

The ability of the neighborhood to reinvent itself yet again has made developers take notice. With rental prices of retail space above \$100 per square foot on Austin Street, developers have started to think creatively. In 2005, the Cord Meyer Development Company built a 21-story condo building, the Windsor, on 108-24 71st Rd. off Austin Street with prices of 2-bedroom apartments exceeding the \$1,000,000 mark. The success of the Windsor has prompted the company to seek approval for a new condo building in a nearby location it owns. A local developer with strong roots in Forest Hills is also building a five-story office building nearby at 108-10 72nd Ave. In 2005, Massey Knakal marketed two large properties with available air rights in Forest Hills—the Yellowstone Portfolio—at 64-22 108th St. The sale

closed at \$22,900,000 and provided 252,000 buildable square feet to its buyer. Additionally, the 72-07/72-19 Austin St. retail strip contained a 9,500 lot with more than 22,800 square feet of air rights (the property is currently under contract).

While new projects abound, the high costs of development, limited land availability and the competition for the Manhattan construction labor pool makes development of middle housing rental apartments almost impossible at this time. Local developers with a long tradition in middle-income housing like Joshua Muss from the Muss Development Company and Eric Bluestone from the Bluestone Organization have chosen to pursue projects in other neighborhoods in the last few years. “Until the luxury condo market cools down, the middle income rental apartment building market will be close to non-existent,” Bluestone said.

Yet 2006 is still young and some slowdown in New York condo sales points to another change in the market direction. Whatever the direction, Forest Hills is rocking with building activity yet again, and will continue to be the hot neighborhood the Meyers and Sages envisioned over 100 years ago.

Nikolay Diankov exclusively covers Forest Hills for Massey Knakal as sales director. He can be reached at 718-275-3400, x2116.

“We need to balance economic growth and community needs,” she affirmed. “In some areas on or close to Queens Boulevard we can upzone, while in the strictly residential areas, we may bring the zoning down from the current R3-2.”