

December 11, 2003

## A Grand Plan in Brooklyn for the Nets' Arena Complex

By CHARLES V. BAGLI

**T**he developer Bruce Ratner unveiled his plans yesterday to build a Frank Gehry-designed arena for the Nets basketball team near Downtown Brooklyn. He detailed his ambitious \$2.5 billion commercial and residential project at a theatrical presentation attended by the mayor, a former basketball star and a best-selling rapper.

Whatever political juice and street credibility he gained — from Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, the former Nets and Knicks legend Bernard King and the performer Jay-Z — Mr. Ratner's presentation at Brooklyn Borough Hall was aimed mainly at the owners of the New Jersey Nets, who are selling the two-time Eastern Conference championship franchise.

A group led by Mr. Ratner of Forest City Ratner Companies has the highest bid, \$275 million. But the sale of the National Basketball Association team has gone through many twists over the last six months, and another round of bidding is in the offing. The news conference was also a response to rivals who questioned whether Mr. Ratner could deliver on his promises.

Showing how pitched the battle will be, Gov. James E. McGreevey of New Jersey upped the ante after the Brooklyn news conference yesterday by saying that his state had secured \$150 million to build a rail line to Continental Arena at the Meadowlands, the Nets' current home.

Mr. Ratner has a track record with such projects, having built, among other things, the seven-million-square-foot MetroTech Center complex nearby in Downtown Brooklyn. For the Nets project, he has assembled a group of well-heeled investors with Brooklyn roots, including Vincent Viola, chairman of the New York Mercantile Exchange, and Jay-Z. (Forest City Ratner is The New York Times Company's partner in developing the new Times headquarters on Eighth Avenue in Manhattan.)

Speaking of the Brooklyn project, Mr. Ratner said: "We are real. This is going to happen." He added, "If we don't get the team there will not be a project."

Mr. Bloomberg lent City Hall's support to the project, saying, "We're rooting hard" for it to succeed.

Outside the news conference, about two dozen residents distributed cookies in the shape of turkeys, an edible reference to their view of Mr. Ratner's proposal for the arena, office towers and apartment buildings. But the Brooklyn Borough president, Marty Markowitz, said the project would fill the hole left when the Brooklyn Dodgers moved to Los Angeles after the 1957 season, a moment that he said still reduces him to tears.

"Brooklyn is a world-class city, and it deserves a world-class team in a world-class arena designed by a world-class architect," he said. "This plan goes even further, creating thousands of apartments affordable to Brooklynites of every income and producing thousands of jobs."

Mr. Ratner said his effort began after Mr. Markowitz called urging him to buy the Nets and move the team to Brooklyn. The 21-acre project centers on the Long Island Rail Road yards at the intersection of Atlantic and Flatbush Avenues. Under the proposal, the tracks for the train storage yard would be moved to the east, allowing the developer to build the \$435 million, 19,000-seat arena for basketball, topped by a park with a running track that could be converted to an ice rink in the winter.

The arena, which will be linked to the Atlantic Terminal subway and train lines, would be embraced by four tall office towers totaling 2.1 million square feet, with up to 4,500 apartments in buildings to the east.

Rather than walling itself off from the community, Mr. Ratner and Mr. Gehry said, the arena would be sheathed in glass, allowing patrons a view of Brooklyn night life and passers-by a look at the interior.

"This started with basketball, a Brooklyn sport," Mr. Ratner said. "This was always the site. But it became clear it was not economically viable without a real estate component. And Frank Gehry was the perfect architect for this site."

Mr. Gehry, who designed the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, and the Mighty Ducks hockey training facility in Anaheim, Calif., said he had never had an opportunity "to build a neighborhood from scratch in an urban setting."

He said the renderings and models on display yesterday were merely the first steps in the designs. "Don't worry about these funny shapes at this point," Mr. Gehry said. "These are just blocks, and we'll make something out of it."

Even some sports economists who have been critical of stadium and arena projects elsewhere are intrigued by Mr. Ratner's plans.

"It has all the ingredients to be successful," said Prof. Mark S. Rosentraub, a sports economist and the dean of Urban Affairs at Cleveland State University in Ohio. "It's a very attractive market. Add in the kind of housing that's being talked about and the retail opportunities, you have something that could work."

Mr. Ratner said that the project "will be almost exclusively privately financed," although taxes derived from elements of the project will be diverted to help pay for it. The developer also wants the Metropolitan Transportation Authority to turn over some of its land and the state to condemn the rest of it. Only one block, he said, had apartment buildings, with about 100 residents.

Mr. Ratner must also survive a grueling environmental review and community opposition.

Despite the developer's pledge to conduct a public review, Patti Hagan, a member of the Prospect Heights Action Coalition, said she was "appalled by the secrecy surrounding the project." She questioned why the city was intent on giving Mr. Ratner exclusive rights to public property without a review.