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Bring Sin City to Governor's Island

Outside-the-box thinking and strong political will could do for New York City's convention center circuit what Jacob Javits Convention Center can't.

With all of the recent talk about the commencement of work on the Governor's Island infrastructure and park project, last week's International Council of Shopping Centers convention in Las Vegas was viewed from a slightly different perspective.



Robert Knakal

Walking around the Las Vegas Convention Center was an almost overwhelming experience. Booth after booth, exhibit hall after exhibit hall, so expansive in its scope, made rubbing elbows with 33,000 real

estate professionals from across the country seem effortless. There was plenty of action to be sure, and many New Yorkers were easily recognizable among the crowd. One thing that stuck out as you wandered around the facility is how spacious it is, how clean and well maintained it is, how efficiently it is laid out.

Another impression was that the facility seemed many times larger than our Jacob Javits Convention Center. Surely, the Las Vegas center must be three or four times bigger than Javits, I thought to myself. As it turns out, at 3.2 million square feet, the LVCC is less than twice as large, from a total square-footage perspective, as Javits, which contains a total of 1.8 million square feet. Perhaps part of the perception of Las Vegas being so much larger is that it has 2.2 million square feet of meeting and exhibition space while Javits has just 675,000 square feet. From that perspective, the Vegas facility is more than three times as large.

How could New York City not have a world-class convention facility? Of course, we do not have a seemingly endless resource of vacant land like Vegas has, but can't we come up with a solution to this deficiency? New York is the greatest city on the planet.

Where could a new center be developed? Governor Cuomo's recent proposal to put a new facility in southern Queens was met with mixed reaction. Yes, it wouldn't cost the city any money, since it would be privately developed; however, opponents point out that southern Queens is not exactly walking distance from Manhattan. This led me to think about the possibility of Governor's Island.

Initially, a better plan for the Hudson Rail Yards would have been to move the Javits center to the eastern rail yards site and a portion of the western rail yards site. Construction costs for a three-story facility above the tracks would have been far less expensive, provided the area to build a much larger center than presently exists and enabled the city to sell or lease the 18 acres of land Javits now sits on, which, given its waterfront locale, would have produced a much more lucrative

deal for the taxpayers. The most valuable portion of the western rail yards would also have remained available for disposition, adding to the overall bargain.

Governor's Island is a 172-acre island in Upper New York Bay, just one-half mile from the southern tip of Manhattan (technically, the island is part of Manhattan). On Jan. 31, 2003, the federal government transferred 150 acres of the land to the State of New York for \$1. The balance of the land was deeded to the U.S. Department of the Interior to be administered by the National Park Service. The transfer to the state came with deed restrictions prohibiting permanent housing or casinos. Subsequently, control of the island was transferred from the state to the city.

Last week, there was a groundbreaking ceremony for the first \$260 million phase of development on the island, which is to include much-needed infrastructure, delivering potable water, demolishing 18 abandoned buildings and improving electrical and telecommunications facilities. Additionally, work will begin on formal gardens, lawns, playgrounds and woodlands. This is a great start.

There are presently 33 acres of land that can be developed for such uses as office, hotel, retail and artists' space; light manufacturing; bed and breakfasts; and educational facilities, as well as short-term rentals like dorms and youth hostels. When the casino use was incorporated into the Genting proposal for a new 3.8-million-square-foot convention center at Aqueduct, those who believed Governor's Island might be a better location were immediately deterred by the deed restriction imposed by the federal government prohibiting casino use.

Last time I checked, the federal government was running \$1.3 trillion budget deficits, with no end in sight, and is in dire need of revenue. Surely, some of our elected officials could negotiate with the feds to lift the restrictions to allow for a casino on the island. A new, world-class, convention center and casino so close to Manhattan would change the city's fiscal picture dramatically. The addition of the casino component would also mean that the city would get its convention center, in all likelihood, without having to spend any taxpayer money.

There is no reason New York City should lag behind Las Vegas and not have a world-class convention facility that is easily accessible from Manhattan. A little thinking outside the box and a bit of courage from some politicians could make it a reality.

Rknakal@masseyknakal.com

Robert Knakal is the chairman and founding partner of Massey Knakal Realty Services and in his career has brokered the sale of more than 1,200 properties, having a market value in excess of \$8 billion.