union square park

FROM BLIGHT TO BLOOM

By Robert W. Walsh

A view of Union Square Park looking north in 1893, when the area was the epicenter for high-class living and luxury shopping.

Robert W. Walsh is commissioner of the New York City Department of Small Business Services and former executive director of the Union Square Partnership.

New York City and its neighborhoods have enjoyed an unparalleled renaissance over the past 20 years. Crime has fallen to historic lows. New developments are cropping up throughout the five boroughs. The city's plan for new housing is the most ambitious in its history. Quality of life has soared. Businesses are opening in places that were formerly inhospitable. Neighborhoods once considered dangerous domains have become home to popular sidewalk cafes, favorite bakeries, children's clothing stores, converted lofts, new parks, and more.

First and foremost, the entity that deserves the most credit for laying the foundation for this renaissance is the New York Police Department (NYPD). Crime fell dramatically throughout the 1990s, and – despite the predictions of naysayers during the recession and budget crisis that followed September 11th – it has continued to decline even further during the past five years. In 2005, the city experienced an additional 3.4 percent drop in overall crime, earning it the distinction of the "safest big city in America" by the FBI.

The NYPD's role in New York City's revival cannot be overestimated. But among the other major contributors to this resurgence have been the city's Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) – where property owners within a given boundary assess themselves to provide for a common pool of funds. From Times Square to Harlem's 125th Street to Downtown Brooklyn, BIDs have proven pivotal partners in catalyzing change and improving conditions. The neighborhoods they have revitalized

HOW A BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT BROUGHT A NEIGHBORHOOD BACK TO LIFE

Throughout the 1970s and early 80s, the neighborhood surrounding Union Square Park was a mess. Caught between the beginnings and ends of numerous neighborhoods and lacking a strong commercial or residential presence, it occupied a virtual no-man's land. Drug dealers controlled the park, vacant storefronts littered the streetscape, and NYU students referred to their color-coded campus maps to see which streets they should avoid after dark. Out of this crisis came commitment. Community activists mobilized in the late 70s to begin a clean-up and revitalization effort that would last for two decades. From the creation of a Local Development Corporation and, later, the city's first Business Improvement District in 1984, to the reconstruction and redesign of the park to the rezoning for residential development and the eventual attraction of new anchor businesses, the renewal of the neighborhood incorporated everything from design and zoning to programming and community outreach. But more than anything, it stemmed from the strong corporate and institutional leadership of active stakeholders.

have in turn sparked tourism, attracted new residents, and brought in business.

Over the past four years, New York City has created nine new Business Improvement Districts, bringing the total number of BIDs throughout the five boroughs to 53 – the largest and most comprehensive network of its kind in the country. The numbers the BIDs put up speak for themselves: $80 million in annual services, 65,000 businesses served, and over 2 million bags of trash collected each year. Since the inception of the BID program more than 20 years ago, the supplemental services they have provided add up to nearly $700 million.

Throughout its early history, New York's Union Square Park served as a central gathering point such as this workers' rally in 1914.

When S. Klein's bargain department store shut its doors in 1975, it marked a low point for the Union Square neighborhood. It would remain vacant until rezoning paved the way for residential towers more than a decade later.

But BIDs are about much more than what mere numbers can convey. Recognizing their importance and expanding their impact has been a key part of Mayor Bloomberg's economic development agenda, and with good reason. Time and again, they have proven to be effective public/private partnerships in revitalizing neighborhoods and enhancing commercial "main streets." They give property owners the forum to collectively respond to immediate needs and craft a long term vision. And a BID can provide the impetus a neighborhood needs to completely transform itself.

The story of BIDs in New York City began in the 14th Street/Union Square neighborhood of Manhattan, which just over two decades ago became home to the city's first BID. In a matter of years, Union Square was transformed from a collection of abandoned buildings surrounding a derelict park into what has become one of the city's most dynamic and popular destinations for residential, retail, and recreation alike.

As director of the Union Square BID and Local Development Corporation (now known as the Union Square Partnership) from 1989 to 1997, I had the chance to see this happen first-hand. And now, as commissioner for the city's Department of Small Business Services, I have watched BIDs flourish, developing an outstanding track record for neighborhood revitalization. The history and success of the Union Square Partnership and Mayor Bloomberg's enthusiastic encouragement to grow more BIDs offer important lessons that are useful for BID pioneers everywhere.

HISTORY OF UNION SQUARE PARK

To understand the dramatic accomplishments of the Union Square Partnership, it's useful to recount the compelling history of Union Square Park and its surrounding blocks. The park opened in the 1830s as a grand residential square and iron-fenced public park. For the next 20 years, it remained a fairly exclusive playground for the fashionable town-house residents who surrounded it, much like the nearby Gramercy Park remains today. With the opening of the Academy of Music in the 1860s, Union Square blossomed into the new "uptown" theatre district, becoming New York's epicenter of high class living and luxury shopping. As the midpoint of the famous "Ladies Mile" shopping district, it featured the original headquarters of firms such as Tiffany's and Macy's.

Perhaps because of the area's status symbol as a mecca for wealth and consumerism, Union Square Park became a pivotal gathering place for New York's political left in the early 1900s. Famous rallies that took place in the park included everything from the Industrial Workers of the World to supporters of Emma Goldman and the women's suffrage movement to the massive protests of the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti.

However, the 1930s and 40s brought significant changes that set the park up for its later demise. As New York's business center shifted, Union Square was left in a gap between the downtown financial district and the rapidly expanding midtown. The luxury shopping anchors departed and new "bargain" department stores such as Hearn's and S. Klein's moved in, giving the area a new brand.

This era also brought the total reconstruction of the park, which was elevated to make room for the construction of the subway. This redesign would prove pivotal in the decades ahead as the park became a haven for crime and drug use. Its elevation above street-level made its interior invisible to pedestrians on the outside, and the park's winding paths prevented anyone from seeing from one end of the park to the other – creating secluded nooks and corners, inviting enclaves for illegal activity.

Beginning in the 1950s and culminating in the closure of S. Klein's in 1975, the entire area was in decline. Businesses shut their doors, and abandoned buildings and vacant lots they left behind led to crime, drug use, and vandalism. Disinvestment bred upon itself and new economic activity was non-existent. Newspaper headlines from the time say it all: "Bums Triumph; City Shuts Park"; "Crackdown on Union Square Drug Market"; "After 18 Months, S. Klein Still Empty"; "Man Slain in Union Square as Hundreds Watch". Space could be rented for as little as $6 a square foot – well below what it would cost property owners to cover taxes and maintenance. Crime continued to rise, and in the late 1970s, the city was forced to impose a dusk-to-dawn curfew on the park. More of the area's once-reliable businesses closed their doors, and the park's unique location – bordered by three police precincts and three community boards – made it a virtual no-man's land when it came to jurisdiction and responsibility.

In the late 1970s, community unrest at the neighborhood's deplorable and blighted conditions gave rise to an incipient movement to reclaim the neighborhood by addressing five principal concerns: peddlers, cleanliness, public safety, the park, and the subway station. This culminated in 1976 when a coalition of government, business, and community groups joined together to form the 14th Street-Union Square Local Development Corporation (LDC).

RECLAIMING THE NEIGHBORHOOD

In the late 1970s, community unrest at the neighborhood's deplorable and blighted conditions gave rise to an incipient movement to reclaim the neighborhood by addressing five principal concerns: peddlers, cleanliness, public safety, the park, and the subway station. This culminated in 1976 when a coalition of government, business, and community groups joined together to form the 14th Street-Union Square Local Development Corporation (LDC). The philosophy of the effort was captured by Charles Luce, then chairman of the board of Consolidated Edison – whose headquarters on 14th Street stood as one of the area's only occupied office buildings – when he summarized its goal: "We believe that many of this area's problems can be solved by bringing community and private resources together with coordinated delivery of city services, thus enhancing public and private efforts to improve the neighborhood."

In the late 70s and early 80s, Union Square Park was beset with dilapidated conditions, drug use, and extreme neglect.

Around this same time, Luce – who had become chairman of Con Ed in 1967 and helped steer the company out of a troubled and turbulent era – was presented with an exceptionally compelling real estate offer that would have relocated the company's headquarters to midtown. In honoring his commitment to the neighborhood, he elected to stay put, knowing that the neighborhood could ill afford to lose one of its giants: "Con Edison would be dealing a severe blow to 14th Street if we pulled out. The street was under severe stress. We were the anchor, by far the largest employer and taxpayer on this famous old street."

In deciding to stay, Luce dedicated himself and his company's resources to revitalizing the neighborhood – a partnership that continues to this day. Con Edison's leadership in turn drew two other major neighborhood institutions to the cause. The first was The Guardian Life Insurance Company. It, like Con Edison, faced similar pressures to flee the neighborhood. Though it had been a Union Square stronghold since 1909, the area's unseemly character made it difficult to attract new employees. The prospect of moving uptown or leaving the city altogether to set up shop in New Jersey was an attractive one. John Angle, a neighborhood resident and senior executive for Guardian who would soon become CEO, thought otherwise. Like Luce, he believed that Guardian should stand fast. He soon

became the company's representative to the board of the new LDC and would later take the reins as the first president of the BID. Together, the corporate backing of both Con Edison and Guardian gave the LDC the early credibility and weight it needed to establish a foothold.

Another major institution whose leadership over the years would prove pivotal was the New School for Social Research (now known as The New School). Its president at the time, John Everett, recognized the value of fusing the synergy between a college and its community as the foundation of a relationship that could meet the needs of both. Everett understood that serving students necessarily entailed working with local civic groups to improve the area, and when he received Luce's invitation to help lead the new LDC, he responded with enthusiasm.

Once in motion, the LDC adopted a slogan – "Sweet 14: We're making it the livingest street in town!" – that reflected both the determination and optimism of its participants. The LDC tackled the issues of crime, maintenance, and design by establishing a local task force that convened volunteers to trim hedges, pick up trash, and repair broken street furniture. It also started raising funds to pay for the removal of shrubbery and other barriers to make the park more accessible.

THE CITY'S FIRST BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT

Their early efforts paid dividends in mobilizing community support for revitalizing the park and its surrounding area. In 1984, this resulted in the birth of the city's first Business Improvement District (BID) surrounding the park and along its 14th Street southern border – the corridor most in need of redevelopment.

Over the next 15 years, the BID and LDC worked together to revitalize the park and its surrounding neighborhood. Ultimately, the scope of their effort broke down into five major areas: Design, Zoning, Programming, District Management, and Community Outreach.

Design

Because the BID and LDC recognized that the Park was the geographic and civic centerpiece of the neighborhood and a lynchpin to its redevelopment ambitions, first and foremost on its agenda was to redesign the park. In order to attract businesses and residents, the Union Square Park needed to function as a major neighborhood asset, not an eyesore.

After acquiring city funding, the BID and LDC hired an architect to assist in the planning process, and together with the Parks Department, launched the redesign of the park. By 1986, a capital plan was developed and Phase I began with the re-landscaping of the park's southern end. The crux of this effort zeroed in on opening up the park to the surrounding community – making it a more integral part of the neighborhood and streetscape, rather than an isolated plateau, walled off by high shrubbery and hidden entrances.

A collection of newspaper headlines from the late 70s and early 80s capture the Park's troubled times.

The renovation, by the Parks Department's own staff, was proclaimed the "best in anyone's memory" by the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. It featured prominent and open new entryways that achieved a greater flow with the surrounding streets and sidewalks. Additionally, the project created street-to-street pathways – enabling sightlines that were not blocked by the curves and winding paths of before, thus ridding the park of the hiding spots that drug dealers found so inviting. The overgrown hedges that had served as convenient cover for addicts, drug dealers, and potential criminals were also removed to make the park more visible and inviting to pedestrians. The redesign also featured the creation of a center lawn, providing a central gathering place and creating a more inviting environment for residents to relax or picnic – something the park previously lacked. Finally, the renovation incorporated new lighting and decorative elements to the park, including generous stone detailing and new glass and steel kiosks at the subway entrances and a newsstand – components that would prove pivotal to increasing pedestrian flow through the park.

Zoning

With structural improvements underway, policy and zoning changes were necessary to catalyze private investment and market Union Square as a desirable place to live. Though the rezoning of the block formerly occupied by the S. Klein department store proved controversial, especially among local merchants and area residents who did not want high-rise condominiums – largely in the name of resisting density and gentrification – it was a cru-

cial part of bringing more residents to the area. When the Zeckendorf Towers opened in 1987, its 650 residential units combined with mixed-use retail and commercial office space – now occupied by the Beth Israel Medical Center – paved the way for the future migration to the area. This development – and the eyes, ears, and pocketbooks of its inhabitants – would prove to be a crucial catalyst in beginning to lure businesses back to Union Square.

By 1988, Phase II of the park's capital plan was underway with a stabilized pavilion area, an upgraded north plaza, and additional park space. These enhancements paved the way for the expansion of the park's famous Greenmarket – a local institution among residents and restaurateurs alike – and the construction of Luna Park, which quickly became one of the city's favorite outdoor cafes.

With all of these improvements, Union Square Park soon became an asset and a driving force for attracting new businesses to the area. Companies such as Barnes & Noble, the W Hotel, and restaurants such as Blue Water Grill had transformed the park's perimeter into one of the city's most highly sought-after patches of real estate. Others soon jumped in on the budding renaissance. New York University built new student dorms – something that would have been unthinkable five years earlier when the school gave its students color coded streetmaps advising which areas near the park should be avoided after nightfall. An old bank was converted into a new theatre, a Virgin Megastore opened up, and – as a real sign of the changing clientele – a Toys 'R' Us opened its doors on Union Square East.

President of the New School John Everett, City Councilmember Carol Greitzer, and Con Edison Chairman Charles Luce unveil the "Sweet 14" street sign in kicking off the area's new Local Development Corporation in 1976. This coalition and the leadership of Con Ed and The New School would prove a pivotal first step in reclaiming the neighborhood.

When the Parks Department's budget declined significantly in the early 1990s, the BID and LDC became increasingly responsible for the park's upkeep. With private foundation support, the BID engaged gardeners to maintain the plants and lawns, facilitated volunteer groups to conduct general upkeep and seasonal plantings, and began budgeting for new park equipment and facility repairs.

Programming

A great park, however, is nothing if people lack a reason to go there. To this end, the BID began coordinating various events in the mid-90s to draw more people into the rehabilitated green space. Events included Arts on the Square, an eight-week series of musical concerts, children's entertainment, poetry readings, and more. This eventually evolved into Summer in the Square, which now hosts events from early May to late September, including the highly-anticipated Harvest on the Square, where signature dishes, desserts, and wines from 45 of the neighborhood's top restaurants are available for the public to sample and enjoy. Additionally, Union Square's annual outdoor holiday market – featuring vendors of arts, crafts, and holiday gift items – attracts over a million visitors each season.

Nothing, however, has done more for bringing people to Union Square than its popular Greenmarket, the city's largest farmers' market. Farmers' markets began in New York City in 1976, when Union Square was arguably at its lowest point. They were the creation of planner and architect Barry Benepe, who saw upstate farmers going out of business due to the economics of selling to wholesalers and the struggle of growing single, shippable crops.

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result has become a phenomenon in almost every city in America. Not only have farmers thrived because of them, but so have restaurants. And in Union Square, the restaurants such as Danny Meyer's Union Square Café and Gramercy Tavern were the pioneers whose presence gave other businesses the confidence to move to the area. As Meyer once said, "If the Union Square farmers' market were to close, I may as well not even have restaurants." And if Union Square didn't have restaurants, its resurgence may have never happened.

Before and after shots of a dilapidated Italianate pavilion at the north end of the park that was transformed into an outdoor café which quickly became one of the city's favorite summertime destinations.

District Management

It is important to remember that during this period of growth and new programs, the BID's fundamental role of district management remained as important as ever. By ensuring that its sanitation, graffiti removal, security, street lighting, and other maintenance services were up to par, the BID communicated to the new arrivals that the neighborhood's resurgence was real. By seeing uniformed individuals every day out cleaning and patrolling the streets, local residents and business owners came to recognize and appreciate the role of the BID. Our security presence, for example, was fore and foremost about sending a message. To this end, we placed our storefront security office right in between two crack houses. It didn't take long for them to clear out.

Community Outreach

After this significant success, with the park attracting people and the neighborhood attracting businesses, the next logical step for the BID was to expand its presence in the community. By venturing beyond the traditional "bricks and mortar" of district development and connecting with community needs beyond those of property owners, the BID was able to build credibility with other stakeholders. This endeavor involved two major projects.

The first major project was a full-scale outreach to the area's homeless population that ultimately resulted in the creation of permanent housing for 94 families in the form of the Genesis Robert F. Kennedy apartments on East 13th Street. Housing is a huge undertaking and one that only makes sense when all the right pieces are in place. The second major project involved the creation of a dynamic partnership between the BID and a local high school. The partnership with Washington Irving Public High School is a project that should resonate with communities everywhere and could be replicated by BIDs and other economic development organizations throughout the country.

People might wonder what BIDs and the schools in their communities have in common. Too often, the answer is too little. It's no secret that public education in inner cities across the country is hurting. Over and over again, when neighborhoods improve and attract new businesses and residents, the students and their schools remain left out.

The atmosphere at Washington Irving High School was unfortunately typical: little to no after-school programs, few opportunities for personal growth, and low expectations of the students. Self-esteem was difficult to promote among the 2,600 students, 70 percent of whom came from low-income families. The perspective of residents, businesses, and property-owners – many of whom viewed the school as an impediment to economic development – did not help. As far as many of the businesses were concerned, the best thing the BID could do for the students was to ensure they got to and from the subway as quickly as possible – without veering off course and disturbing business. Some even argued that the school be shut down.

New York City's Proactive Approach to Growing BIDs

Shortly after September 11th, Mayor Michael Bloomberg took office in New York City. I met him for the first time during the interview for my present position. In our conversation, he made it clear that he not only wanted to energize the city's BID program, but expand it by creating more BIDs throughout the five boroughs. The tone, spirit and commitment of his vision for empowering BIDs as partners in the city's economic development strategy was so inspiring that I found myself shaking his hand and accepting the position an hour later.

Mayor Bloomberg asked me to run an agency called the Department of Small Business Services that had always overseen relationships with the city's BIDs and other neighborhood organizations. We moved quickly to devise and implement a set of new policies to make it easier for BIDs to form and grow. This included decreasing the time it took to form or expand a BID; providing matching grants to spearhead BID-planning initiatives; allowing qualified BIDs to increase their annual assessments; creating a best practices forum for BIDs to share and learn new ideas; creating neighborhood-focused teams to support individual BIDs; and making it easier for BIDs to finance capital projects.

Four years later, the results are impressive: over the past four years, New York City has created nine new Business Improvement Districts, bringing the total number of BIDs throughout the five boroughs to 53. It is also worth noting that of the nine new BIDs, eight of them have annual budgets of less than $500,000. While New York City may be best known for high profile, deep-pocketed and successful BIDs such as those in and around Lower Manhattan, Grand Central, and Times Square, the reality is that the vast majority of our BIDs operate on a more modest scale in small, main-street corridors throughout the five boroughs: 34 of our 53 BIDs have annual operating budgets under $500,000.

We've made great strides in bolstering this program, and for those that ask me how we've been able to make such great gains in such a short period of time, I point to three primary strategies:

Tone needs to be set at the top. By establishing such a resonant tone and voicing his engagement with the initiative, Mayor Bloomberg made a quick and lasting impact with staff working on the BID program at the line level. His commitment provided a sense of urgency coupled with motivation that inspired a new outlook.

Establish open lines of communication. To encourage a consistent stream of new ideas, we began convening the BIDs on a regular basis right from the start. This not only meant hosting regular monthly meetings in our conference room, but also putting together conferences on best practices and an annual awards ceremony where the mayor recognizes organizations that have done outstanding work in new and unique ways.

Get out from behind the desk and out into the community. Simply put, we began walking the streets in the shoes of the BIDs. What we do includes everything from attending board meetings to touring districts block-by-block to meeting with and listening to the concerns of businesses and property owners. This has provided an entirely new level of insight regarding how we can assist those organizations that need extra help, and, frankly speaking, get out of the way of those who do not.

All told, these strategies have brought about a sea change in the way city government relates to local community-based organizations. The agency has grown from a pass-through contract agency to an innovative organization that takes a proactive stance to help neighborhood groups better serve their communities.

One of the new BIDs the city recently created – at Fordham Road in the Bronx – would probably not have happened without this approach. Prior to this administration, this effort had stalled because of various roadblocks, and local stakeholders were ready to throw in the towel. In fact, Fordham Road property owners and businesses had been trying in vain to create a BID since the early 1980s. By taking a keen interest, the mayor provided us with a mandate to bring it to fruition. Beyond dedicating staff to guide the steering committee through the formation process, we also provided it with seed money to hire a consultant whose door-to-door canvassing of the strip proved the tipping point in mobilizing support for the BID.

As these examples illustrate, by working together and challenging each other in these partnerships, government and community organizations can empower neighborhoods and cities much more effectively than when working alone

Events such as a summer concert series played a key role in attracting residents back to the Park.

But when the school's principal approached us for help, we responded by creating the Washington High School Business Advisory Council. Rather than continuing to allow the business community and the students to exist in different worlds, we built a bridge between the two, infusing a student's high school experience with the opportunities available after graduation. We established a mentoring and tutoring program, solicited summer jobs for students, and secured funding from the AT&T Foundation to wire classrooms with high-speed Internet access. Students interested in journalism worked with professional publishers. Area experts provided tours of local landmarks to art students. By bringing the local business community to the school, students discovered the wealth of resources at their fingertips and the opportunities right in their own backyard, and business leaders learned that they had both a role to play and a responsibility to uphold in shaping the school's mission.

The program continues to this day and other organizations have crafted similar efforts after this initial model. The Lincoln Square BID, located on the Upper West Side near Columbus Circle, began an after-school program in 1999 to build a relationship among the neighborhood's thousands of students, and its merchants and cultural organizations. Today, the program provides students with critical academic support such as tutoring, homework assistance, SAT preparation, computer and writing support, recreational activities, and real career and job opportunities through valuable internships.

At the end of the day, communities are defined by the ways in which they come together. Whether in times of celebration or crisis, an immediate response or long-range planning – a community's strength lies in its interconnectedness. And nowhere is this more evident than in the story of Union Square's renaissance.

These creative partnerships achieve two powerful goals: developing relationships and cultivating civic responsibility. I knew that we had formed strong community bonds when getting businesses to participate was no longer a matter of twisting arms. When one of New York's favorite restaurants, the Union Square Café, had to temporarily shut its doors because of serious water damage, the owner sent his kitchen staff to Washington Irving High School to work in the cafeteria for the week. Not only did the kids have a great time but so did the cooks (needless to say, expectations in the cafeteria have never been the same). Successful community outreach, done right and with passion, can be a critical component for neighborhood renewal and economic development.

IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP

In a city that typifies America's characteristic as a melting pot, Union Square is a place where many things converge – neighborhoods, people, businesses, police precincts, council districts, and cuisines. Perhaps part of this is why it became such an important gathering place so many years ago. It is a connecting point, a nexus. Today, Union Square has regained its status as a spot where New Yorkers converge. Images from the aftermath of September 11 or the blackout of August 2003 say it all: during those times of crisis, Union Square Park was where New Yorkers came to.

At the end of the day, communities are defined by the ways in which they come together. Whether in times of celebration or crisis, an immediate response or long-range planning – a community's strength lies in its interconnectedness. And nowhere is this more evident than in the story of Union Square's renaissance. During a time when the neighborhood was disconnected and struggling

Perhaps the most important thing to recognize is that you do not need to be a huge corporation or major university to play a role. Two very compelling cases in point can be found in Brooklyn. One is in Fort Greene, where the Pratt Institute, a small school of arts and design, has played a lead role in helping transform a commercial strip from a collection of 99 cent stores, nail salons, and abandoned storefronts into one of Brooklyn's most up-and-coming "main streets."

Once again, Union Square Park serves as the city's central meeting point. Even during times of crisis, such as this vigil following September 11, New Yorkers seek solace and solidarity on its common ground.

to find its identity, its members came together to save it from demise. With the leadership of Con Edison, Guardian Life, and The New School came a momentum that refused to look back.

I cannot emphasize enough the significance that this leadership represented. After the departure of Charles Luce from Con Edison, his successor, Eugene McGrath, took up exactly where he left off. The same can be said of Jonathan Fanton, who succeeded Dr. Everett at the New School and whose leadership took Union Square's revitalization to the next level. Together, they co-chaired the BID and LDC during my tenure, and I count myself lucky to have worked with two giant pillars of community leadership. They were not content to stand idly by, waiting for the neighborhood to change. Instead, they took an active role, whether it was sitting in marathon meetings, walking the streets, or recruiting a new business to the block. They set an example for engaged leadership that I have rarely seen repeated.

When the neighborhood had successfully turned the corner and fashionable shops, luxury apartments, and fine restaurants populated the perimeter of the park, Fanton and McGrath realized that the organization's role had changed. No longer were we just about curbing crime and fighting decay – we were improving lives. It was through their vision that we undertook initiatives such as the creation of housing for the homeless and partnering with Washington Irving High School.

In my current role as commissioner of the city's Department of Small Business Services, where we work with BIDs and LDCs throughout the five boroughs, the examples set by Fanton and McGrath are something I would like to see more. Too often, corporations and institutions like universities fail to realize the tremendous impact they can have in their communities. It is my hope in writing this article and recounting the story of Union Square that the lessons it confers will help coax more participation and leadership from such significant partners.

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Another example is Brooklyn College, whose home in the Flatbush Junction section of Brooklyn is about to undergo a series of capital streetscape improvements in addition to a new Target superstore. Foreseeing the potential pedestrian traffic and other future retail that these investments may draw, Brooklyn College and its president, Dr. Christoph Kimmich, have spearheaded the effort to form a BID for the area. By getting involved early on during the revitalization process, the college has ensured its position as a lead stakeholder and further ensured that the district will have the resources it needs to remain a clean, safe, and attractive place to do business.

With leadership like that brought by the Pratt Institute and Brooklyn College, neighborhoods like Myrtle Avenue and Flatbush Junction will someday warrant their own case study in a journal like this. And if we can succeed in getting more institutions to emulate their success, we're bound to see a lot more stories like that of Union Square.