

## Roosevelt Island, Manhattan's Other Island

### *A Brief Overview*



**Background** – Blackwell's Island, a 147 acre island in the middle of the East River, was privately owned by the Blackwell family. It stayed in the family's hands despite numerous attempts to sell it, until 1828, when the City of New York purchased it and transformed it to an island for municipal institutions such as prisons, poor houses, and nursing homes. In 1921, the island was renamed Welfare Island to reflect its role as a repository for the ill and outcast.

In the years that followed, many of the City's institutions were moved off the island. With the opening of Rikers Island in 1935, the Blackwell Penitentiary, which housed inmates such as actress Mae West and William Marcy "Boss" Tweed, the former Mayor of New York and Tammany Hall leader, closed. By the late 1960's, only two institutions remained: Goldwater Memorial Hospital and Bird S. Coler Memorial Hospital; the other institutions lay dormant or were demolished.

In 1968, New York City Mayor John Lindsay organized a committee to explore options for using Welfare Island, and the idea of a residential community was born. In 1969, at the behest of the City, the New York State Urban Development Corporation signed a 99 year lease (the Lease) with New York City to develop the island, using a master plan (the General Development Plan, GDP) designed by architects Philip Johnson and John Burgee as its guideline. This plan called for a mixed-income community of individuals ranging from low income to market rate, with a special emphasis on providing housing for the elderly, hospital workers and the disabled, to be living in 5,000 units in a largely traffic free environment. Several amendments to the Lease and General Development have somewhat altered the number of units and reduced the total projected population. Currently there are approximately 4,500 units, with two more high rise buildings under construction and three more approved for development. In addition, there are still two functioning City hospitals, with thousands of hospital employees commuting to and from round the clock shifts.

**Residential Development** - The island was renamed Roosevelt Island in 1973, and the first residential complex opened in 1975, followed a year later by three additional housing complexes, bringing the total number of units to 2,141. These first phase buildings, named Eastwood, Westview, Island House and Rivercross are collectively referred to as the WIRE buildings. The aerial Tramway was opened in the late 1970's, substituting for an elevator to be rebuilt in a leg of the Queensborough Bridge and contemplating a delay in the opening of a promised subway. The Tram is currently recording approximately 1.6 million riders per year. The subway opened in the early 1990's. It is currently serviced by the F train, running to and from Queens and is overfull during rush hours.

In 1989 an additional complex (Manhattan Park) of 1,107 units was completed, including several hundred apartments built under the low income Section Eight program. Shortly thereafter, The United Nations Development Corporation (UNDC) issued a report suggesting that the original estimate of 20,000 residents for the island was too high, and the General Development Plan for the island was amended accordingly in 1990. Since then the Octagon Development was completed, adding an additional 500 rental units to the Island and Southtown, consisting of 9 high rise buildings is under construction with 4 buildings completed and two more currently in construction.

**Jurisdiction** - Roosevelt Island, in the heart of New York City, is under the political jurisdiction of Manhattan, but receives its police, sanitation and fire services from Queens, as the only vehicular access point to the Island. Today, Roosevelt Island is home to residents who, along with other City residents, commuters and tourists alike, frequent its roads and rely on its infrastructure and enjoy its parks and historic landmarks. The Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation was created by the New York State Legislature in 1984 as a public benefit corporation charged with maintaining, operating and developing Roosevelt Island. Unlike its predecessor, the state Urban Development Corporation (UDC), RIOC does not have the authority to issue bonds.

The State of New York holds a 99-year lease on the island, which will expire in 2068; ownership will then revert to the City. The Lease and GDP contemplates that a State entity develop the Island, with municipal services to be provided by New York City, equivalent to those provided to all other New York City neighborhoods:

Lessor shall not discriminate against residents of the Leased premises with respect to the provision of police, fire, sanitation, health protection, public education and other municipal services. Lessor shall ... lease each Public Facility from Lessee upon completion for the sum of one (\$1) dollar and Lessor thereafter during the term of this Lease shall have the right to operate and maintain such facility in conformity herewith. (Lease, dated December 23, 1969; 3. Lessor's Public Facilities).

As development of the Island continues the State, through RIOC, has been providing some additional public health and safety services such as Public Safety, grounds and street maintenance, supplementing the services to be supplied by the City of New York.