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Friday
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BY ERROL LOUIS PLAN TO GROW BX. JAIL NEEDS FERTILE MINDS; [SPORTS FINAL Edition]

ERROL LOUIS. New York Daily News. New York, N.Y.: Jul 18, 2006. pg. 31

Full Text (576 words)

Copyright Daily News, L.P. Jul 18, 2006

Martin Horn, the city's correction commissioner, isn't exactly trying to work himself out of a job, but he wants to do the next best thing: close down Rikers Island, where 13,600 souls are locked up on any given day. Horn's vision of replacing Rikers with a network of smaller jails in each borough is about to trigger New York's next big land-use battle.

One part of Horn's vision, expanding and reopening the currently unused Brooklyn House of Detention on Atlantic Ave., is a no-brainer; the facility, built in 1957, is a block from the borough's criminal courts. Horn plans to more than double the number of inmates held there from the old maximum of 800 to 1,960.

A far more heated battle is shaping up in the Bronx over Horn's plan to build a new, 2,000-bed neighborhood jail on a 28-acre stretch of waterfront called Oak Point on the Hunts Point peninsula. A coalition of environmental activists led by Sustainable South Bronx, a community organization, has been developing a compelling vision of its own: an eco-friendly industrial park filled with companies that generate recyclable waste and firms that would buy and use the waste on the spot.

At first glance, it seems possible that both visions can co-exist at Oak Point. The proposed jail would take up 11 acres, leaving most of the parcel potentially available for the industrial park.

The conflict, if there is one, will stem from miscommunication. City officials have kept local elected officials in the dark about the new jail, which is scheduled to go up for community review under the city's land-use process in the fall.

City Councilwoman Maria del Carmen Arroyo, who represents the neighborhood, complained in May that Correction Department officials announced plans to build the jail without informing her. "This is par for the course," she said. "The city plans and we react."

Rep. Jose Serrano, who also claimed to be out of the loop, said he might push for federal legislation that would turn Oak Point into a national historic site under control of the National Parks Service, making it off-limits as a jail. That's not just an idle threat: The area was the scene of a famous 1904 steamship crash, the General Slocum disaster, that claimed more than 1,000 lives.

While taking me on a tour of Rikers, Horn made a compelling case for shutting the place down. An estimated 5,000 people visit Rikers every week, and every one of them has to take a long, expensive, convoluted journey through Queens and over the one bridge connecting Rikers with the mainland.

The same goes for the 60,000 or so inmates who pass through the jail every year. Sixty-five percent of them get released within 30 days, but Correction must run a big, expensive network of hundreds of vans and buses to ferry inmates to and from courts in all five boroughs.

The island itself is old, strained and overcrowded. Some cellblocks have floor tiles missing, and there are puddles all over the place when it rains. Horn has every good reason to start shutting the place down.

The Bronx groups, who have battled against pollution and asthma for years, make an equally good case for a recycling center.

Now would be a good time for statesmen and women at City Hall and Borough Hall to work out a compromise that makes the city safer and cleaner at the same time.

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[Illustration]

Caption: Martin Horn

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