New York City Independent Budget Office

Parkland and Public Transit

QueensWay and QueensLink Eye
Deactivated Rail Line in Southeast Queens

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October 8, 2025

Executive Summary

The long-deactivated Rockaway Beach Branch (RBB) of the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) in Southeast Queens has two separate proposals for public use of the land. The QueensLink project would reactivate the rail line as a segment of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's (MTA) subway system and contain an adjacent park. The QueensWay project

would develop the entire RBB to construct an elevated park, akin to the High Line park on the west side of Manhattan.

At the request of City Council Member Selvena Brooks-Powers, IBO conducted a series of analyses on demographic and socioeconomic indicators within the project area to provide context for the two proposals. IBO defined the QueensWay/QueensLink project area as all census tracts that intersect a 3/4 mile radius, or approximately a 15-minute walk, of the proposed rail stations. Demographic and socioeconomic metrics suggest that the project area fairs slightly better than the citywide rates for most metrics. Specifically, relative to citywide, the project area reflects:

- Recent population growth follows similar patterns, on average
- Median household incomes are slightly higher
- Lower rates of household poverty, as measured by the Federal Poverty Level
- Largely residential land use, higher homeownership rates, and fewer new housing units built
- Most people commute to work using their personal vehicles
- Park and park amenity access varies across different parts of the project area

IBO also noted that several metrics suggest that the project area north of Forest Park differs in demographics than the project area to the south. IBO found that the southern half of the project area has a larger non-White population, has lower median household incomes, has higher rates of rent-burdened households, and has less access to parks when compared with the north half of the project area.

Introduction

The RBB line in Queens has lain partially abandoned since 1962. The RBB began service in the late 1880s as a line on the LIRR. The line ran through Rego Park, Forest Hills, Glendale, Woodhaven, Richmond Hill, Ozone Park, and the Rockaways while also providing connections to LIRR branches into the downtowns of Brooklyn and Manhattan.

The RBB suffered from low ridership numbers, and the LIRR sought to phase out the line. The City of New York—seeing potential in the line—purchased the RBB from the LIRR in 1953. The LIRR then leased the land from the City and continued to run train service between the main line and Ozone Park until its lease expired in 1962. At that point, the City took over the land. Since rail service ended, the tracks have remained abandoned, and decades of neglect have led to the dense vegetation on the tracks, as well as littering and illegal dumping.

Currently, the 3.5-mile-long stretch of unused railway is the site of two community-led proposals. One proposal, QueensLink, seeks to reactivate the rail right-of-way to create a north-south train line, which currently does not exist in the Queens borough. The other proposal, QueensWay, seeks to convert the land into an elevated linear park. Both proposals have the support of various advocacy organizations and politicians.

QueensLink

The QueensLink Plan is a proposed project to reactivate the abandoned rail infrastructure of the RBB to create a dual-purpose active train line with accompanying park space and a bike path. This plan is spearheaded by QueensRail, a non-profit organization formed to advocate for QueensLink. The plan seeks to extend the existing M Queens Boulevard/Sixth Avenue Local train by diverting it west of the Forest Hills-71st Ave stop, where it would branch off from the Queens

Boulevard section of the subway and run through a new two-tube tunnel under 67th Avenue. The extended M train would turn slightly at Fleet Street to run under the existing LIRR Rockaway Beach Branch right-of-way and eventually emerge onto the above-ground existing tracks. This plan requires the construction of a new bridge where the train would cross over the LIRR Lower Montauk line rail tracks and Union Turnpike.

QueensRail initially proposed solely reactivating rail service on the abandoned infrastructure but pivoted to advocating for a rail line with accompanying green space. The QueensLink Plan includes four additional New York City Transit stations with transfers to the A, J/Z, E/F/R subway lines and LIRR commuter trains. The plan also proposes up to 33 acres of new park space and protected bike paths along the rail line.

In 2019, the MTA conducted a feasibility study on reactivating the RBB and determined that it would cost approximately $8.1 billion to reactivate it for New York City Transit. Disagreeing with these estimates, QueensRail commissioned a separate feasibility study completed by Transportation Economics and Management Systems, Inc. (TEMS). The TEMS feasibility study estimated costs for the QueensLink project to be between $3.4 and $3.7 billion.

QueensWay

The QueensWay Plan is a proposal to convert the abandoned rail infrastructure of the RBB into a linear, elevated park akin to the High Line park that runs along the western edge of Manhattan. (Note that the High Line is a unique project and its success cannot be used to predict success of other elevated parks.[1]) The QueensWay plan is led by an advocacy group named Friends of the QueensWay in partnership with the national nonprofit organization Trust for Public Land. In September 2022, Mayor Eric Adams expressed his support for the QueensWay plan. Following that announcement, the City's

Capital Budget included $35 million for design and construction of the first section of the QueensWay plan. This first section was named the Metropolitan Hub and planned for 0.3 miles of the abandoned RBB to be converted into a five-acre greenway. In March 2024, Mayor Adams announced that the QueensWay was granted $118 million in funding from the U.S. Department of Transportation from the Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods Program to construct the second phase of the plan, named the Forest Park Pass. The second phase would be a 0.7-mile expansion developing the land into nine acres of greenspace, connecting the Metropolitan Hub to Forest Park. The New York City Economic Development Corporation was managing the construction of the Metropolitan Hub in conjunction with the Department of Parks and Recreation.

However, on July 4, 2025, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) was signed by the President, containing numerous tax and spending policies. (Since the OBBBA/H.R. 1 was enacted in July 2025, the Trump administration has indicated that, beginning in September, it will refer to the measure as the "Working Families Tax Cut Act.") Several projects included under the "Neighborhood Access and Equity" grant program saw their funding rescinded, including the funding for the construction of the second phase of the QueensWay plan. Only $5.8 million of the original $118 million had already been awarded to the New York City Department of Transportation; the remainder has been terminated.

Data & Assumptions

IBO conducted a series of spatial analyses to analyze the demographic and socioeconomic traits of the area surrounding the former RBB. To conduct this analysis, IBO defined the QueensLink/QueensWay project area (hereafter

referred to as the “project area”) as all census tracts that intersect a 3/4 mile radius, or approximately a 15-minute walk, of the proposed rail stations. IBO assumes that a 15-minute walk is a broad but reasonable distance for accessing public transit and parkland in New York City. Figure 1 shows the boundary IBO defined as the project area and the currently abandoned RBB infrastructure. Below, IBO also compares the project area between the north and south components, separated by Forest Park which cuts east-west across the project area (green in the map).

Figure 1: Map of the QueensLink/QueensWay Project Area

Source: IBO analysis of U.S. Census Bureau census tracts

The QueensLink proposal would extend the M train line all the way to the Rockaway peninsula by connecting to the existing A train line. Therefore, this proposal would also impact residents and businesses of the neighborhoods in that area. However, IBO focused on the project area defined above assuming that the most impacted areas would be those within walking distance of the new rail line or park, rather than the areas already being served by other train lines.

To conduct analysis on the demographics and socioeconomic traits of project area residents, IBO used data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the New York City Primary Land Use Tax Lot Output (PLUTO) dataset created by the Department of City Planning. For a full list of the datasets used in this analysis, see the list of data sources at the end of this report.

IBO's analysis captures a general picture of residents in the project area but does not capture workers or visitors to the area. These are additional populations that would likely benefit from either QueensLink or QueensWay.

Findings

IBO conducted a series of analyses on demographic and socioeconomic indicators within the project area and compared them with citywide indicators to present a picture of residents in the area served by these proposals. IBO also noted if patterns within the project area differed substantially between census tracts north of Forest Park and those to the south.

Population

According to the 2020 Decennial Census, there are approximately 175,000 people living within the project area, a 6.9% increase from the 2010 decennial Census.[2] This rate of growth tracks with broader citywide growth patterns; from 2010 to 2020, the New York City population grew by 7.1%. For perspective, the project area has approximately the same population as the average City Council District in New York City.

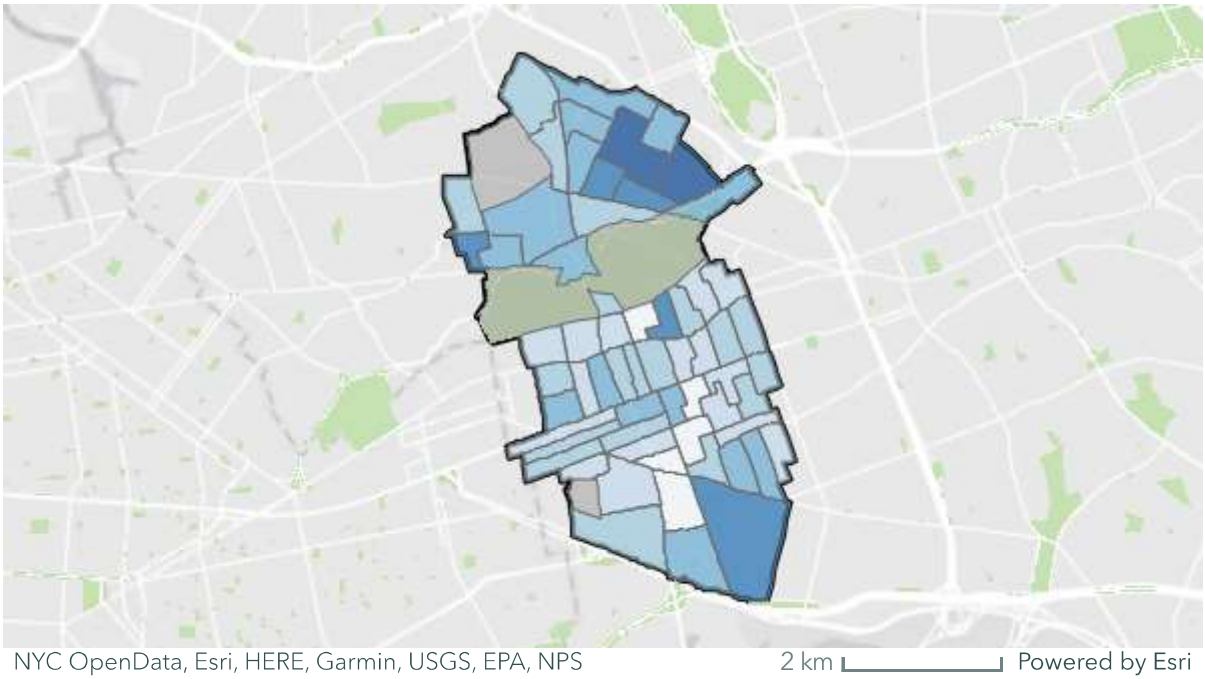
The project area has a slightly larger non-White population than the citywide average. The percentage of non-White population (defined as census survey respondents not

identifying as "White Alone, not Hispanic") within the project area is 68.4%, compared with 62.5% citywide.

Income and Employment

The economic metrics reviewed suggest that the project area has higher incomes and lower poverty levels than citywide averages. However, the portions of the project area north of Forest Park have higher income and lower poverty than the south parts. Figure 2 shows median household income by census tract in the project area, with the large green segment in the middle of the project area representing Forest Park.

Figure 2: Median Household Income by Census Tracts in the Project Area



Source: IBO analysis of U.S. Census Bureau
American Community Survey 2022 5-year Estimates

U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey data from 2022 shows that median household income is a bit higher in the project area than the median citywide—$88,237 in the project area compared with $76,607 citywide. The north section of the project area has a median household income of

$108,616, compared to the south section of the project area with a median household income of $84,291.[3]

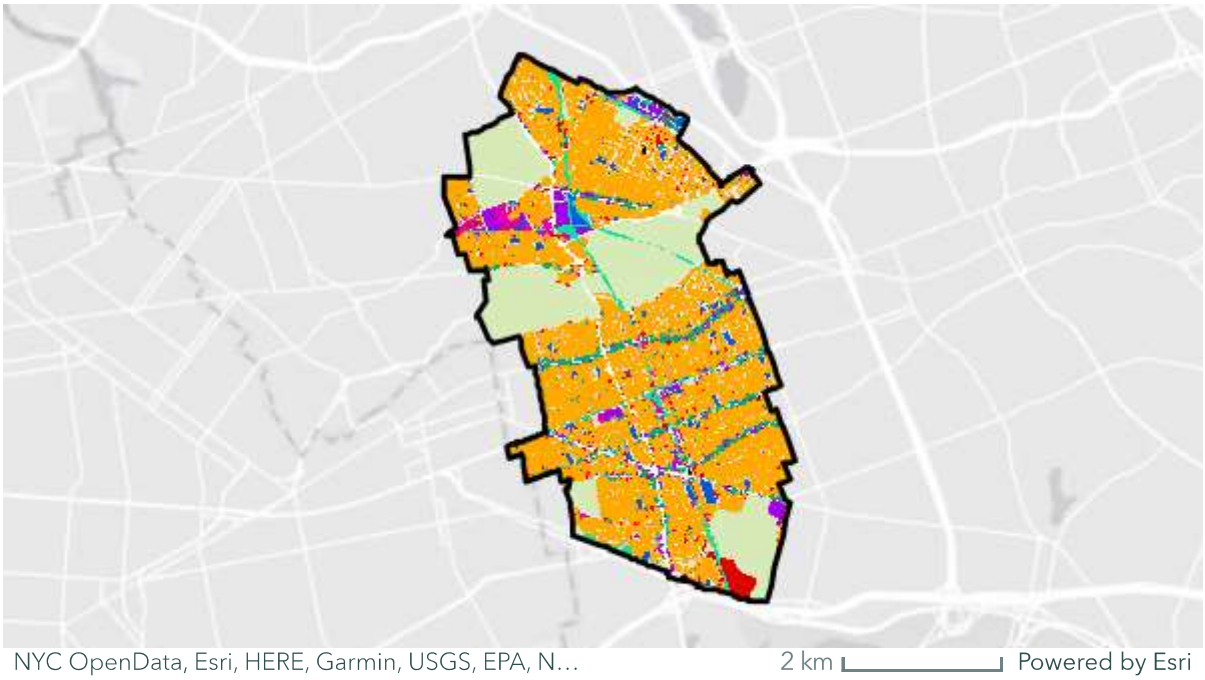
Unemployment rates within the project area are lower than the citywide unemployment rate of 7.6%; the north section of the project area has an unemployment rate of 4.7%, while the south part has a 7.2% unemployment rate.[4]

The percentage of families living under poverty as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau in the project area was 10% in 2022, compared with 17% citywide. Within the project area, 63.7% of the population over 16 years old were participating in the labor force in 2022, effectively the same as the citywide estimate of 63.2%. Additionally, the percentage of households that utilized Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) dollars at least once in a 12-month period was 12% in the project area, compared to 20% of households across the City, according to 2022 U.S. Census Bureau data.

Land Use

IBO used land use data from the PLUTO dataset published by the New York City Department of City Planning to examine the types and distribution of buildings in the project area. IBO found that within the project area, 98% of tax lots are classified as residential, with around 80% of those being single family homes and the rest being multifamily walkups and elevator buildings. Only 2% of the tax lots within the project area were other classifications, such as “commercial & office properties,” “industrial & manufacturing,” and “open space & recreation.” Figure 3 colors each property lot by land use category, with orange representing residential properties. Notably, the largest lots are public parks, cemeteries, and other open space (light green), which includes Forest Park. Overall, the project area is overwhelmingly residential.

Figure 3: Land Use in the Project Area



Source: IBO Analysis of Department of City Planning PLUTO Data

Housing

Housing development is also an important indicator of neighborhood change. Higher housing development may also signal a greater burden on public infrastructure, such as transit, parks, sewer lines, and schools. The Department of Buildings provides data on new housing units certified for occupancy, broken out by Community Districts. IBO found that the project area partially intersects four Community Districts: Queens 10 (South Ozone Park/Howard Beach), Queens 9 (Kew Gardens/Woodhaven), Queens 6 (Rego Park/Forest Hills), and Queens 5 (Ridgewood/Maspeth).

Figure 4 shows the new certified housing units from 2000 through 2023 for the four Community Districts that overlap with the project area. IBO found that the Community District average of new units certified in this period citywide was about 8,400. In the same period, the four Community Districts intersecting the project area each added less than half that amount. This may suggest that either the project area may not include neighborhoods of high demand for new housing, zoning regulations restrict additional housing development in

the area, or both. It may also suggest that there have been fewer changes on the usage of public infrastructure in the project area than Community Districts which saw larger increases in housing since 2000. IBO also noted that the project area does not contain any New York City Housing Authority properties.

Figure 4: New Certified Housing Units from 2000 through 2023 by Project Area Community District

Community Districts	New Certified Housing Units (2000 – 2023)
North of Forest Park	
QN 05 – Ridgewood/Maspeth	3,038
QN 06 – Rego Park/Forest Hills	2,855
South of Forest Park	
QN 09 – Kew Gardens/Woodhaven	2,512
QN 10 – South Ozone Park/Howard Beach	1,463
New York City Average per Community District	8,418

Souce: Department of Buildings Data

IBO used data from the NYU Furman Center's "State of New York City's Housing and Neighborhoods in 2024" to examine the share of rent burdened households and share of homeownership in the four Community Districts that overlap with the project area—Queens 5, 6, 9, and 10. In 2022, around

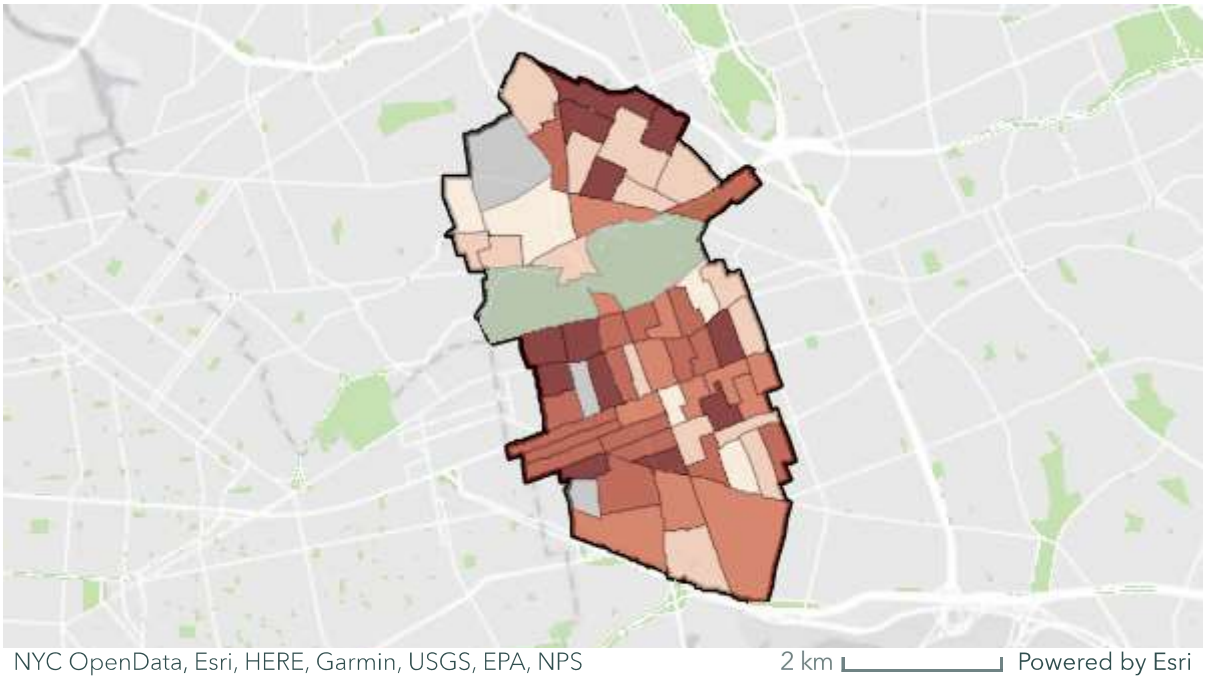
30% of renters paid more than half of their gross income towards rent, a metric to measure the number of households "severely rent burdened."[5] This is similar to citywide levels of severely rent-burdened households.

The homeownership rate in these Community Districts ranges from 42% in Queens Community District 5 up to 68% in Queens Community District 10, as measured in 2022. All four Community Districts have a notably higher homeownership rate than the citywide rate (29%), indicating that there are fewer rental housing units in this area in general; renters are a smaller slice of the overall housing picture in this part of Queens than in other parts of the City.

Transportation and Commuting Patterns

Within the project area, 44% of people commute to work using public transit, compared to 47% citywide. As for drivers, 39% of people commute to work using their personal vehicles, compared to 27% citywide. This means there are fewer public transit users and more drivers in the project area that the citywide average. It is unclear to what degree this reflects lack of access to public transit or personal preference. Figure 5 shows the percentage of people commuting to work using public transportation for each census tract in the project area.

Figure 5: Percentage of People Commuting to Work Using Public Transportation

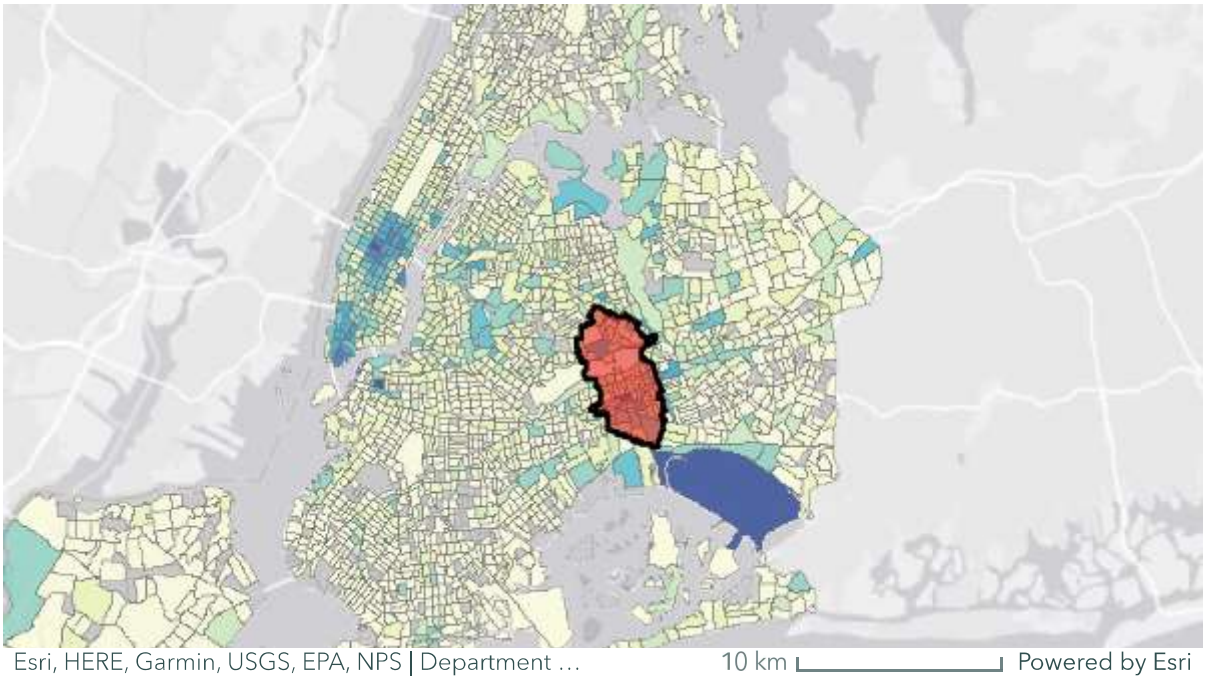


Source: IBO analysis of U.S. Census Bureau
American Community Survey 2022 5-year Estimates

To understand travel patterns between census tracts, IBO used the Census Bureau's Origin-Destination Employment Statistics data. IBO found the most common destinations for those commuting from the project area include Midtown and Lower Manhattan, followed by Downtown Brooklyn. A sizeable number of commuters also travel to work in John F. Kennedy International Airport. Figure 6 shows the geographical distribution of commuter destinations for trips that original from the project area.

It is impossible to predict how project area residents would change travel patterns under the proposed projects. Most people within the project area commute to work using public transportation, but the percentage is lower than citywide averages The percentage of people using personal vehicles to commute to work is higher in the project area than citywide.

Figure 6: Final Destinations of Commuters from Project Area



Source: IBO Analysis of U.S. Census Burau Origin-Destination Employment Statistics Data

Park and Park Amenity Access

The City Council's Data Team created a dataset for the Committee on Parks and Recreation in 2022. This dataset quantified the amount of functional park acreage per 100,000 residents by zip code. City Council's analysis classified zip codes by the amount of park acreage they have compared to other zip codes. It specifically highlighted zip codes that are in the bottom 25% of park access in the City. Park access is the amount of usable park acreage available to a resident within a 10-minute walk. Out of the 10 zip codes that could be considered wholly or mostly within the project area, six of them were in the bottom 25% of park access, four of which are in the southern part of the project area.

Using data from the Department of Parks and Recreation's Vital Parks Explorer, IBO was able to compile data specifically on the percent of residents living within the project area and within a 10-minute walk to specific park amenities. Figure 7 reveals the percentages of Community District residents that are within a 10-minute walk of each amenity or facility, including athletic facilities and children playgrounds. Park

metrics suggest that several parts of the project area have low access to public parks relative to the rest of the City, particularly in the south part of the project area. Similarly, specific park amenities such as children playgrounds and sport courts appear to be more common in the north part of the project area, compared to the south part of the project area.

Figure 7: Public Park Amenity Access by Community District

Amenity or Facility	QN 05	QN 06
Athletic Field, Sport Court, or Skate Park	87%	84%
Drinking Fountain or Spray Shower	90%	90%
Park with High Condition Score (Defined as 95 or above)	80%	84%
Children's Playground	80%	84%
Public Restroom Operated by NYC Parks	66%	80%

Source: Department of Parks and Recreation Vital Parks Explorer Data

QN 09	QN 10	Citywide
69%	58%	80%
71%	54%	85%
64%	54%	71%

QN 09	QN 10	Citywide
64%	51%	79%
59%	32%	70%

Source: Department of Parks and Recreation Vital Parks Explorer Data

Conclusion

There are many factors for the City to consider when deciding whether to make the RBB an elevated park (QueensWay) or public transit (QueensLink). IBO prepared this analysis to provide context for the current state of the project area. IBO found that in general, the project area has income and employment rates comparable to citywide levels and is largely residential, although with limited new housing development in recent years. IBO also noted that on multiple metrics, the north part of the project area differed from the south, indicating some variation even within the project area.

For transportation, the project area has more personal vehicle users than citywide average, although public transit is still the most common form of commute. Whether the use of personal vehicles would shift if the rail line became integrated into the existing public transit system is unknown. In terms of park access, the south part of the project area falls behind compared with citywide measures, while the north part seems to have greater than average access.

Certainly, increased access to green space and more options for public transit would both be beneficial to residents,

workers, and visitors to the project area. The priorities of the community, project financing, and benefits to eastern Queens more broadly need to be weighed in deciding an appropriate use for the RBB line.

Data Sources

U.S. Census Bureau

Note: IBO used American Community Survey (ACS) data from 2022 because it was the most recent year available at the time of analysis.

- ACS 5-year Averages – Means of Transportation (B08301)
- ACS 5-year Averages – Median Household Income 2022 (B19013)
- ACS 5-year Averages – Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months (S1701)
- ACS 5-year Averages - Receipt of Food Stamps/SNAP in the Past 12 Months by Presence of People 60 Years and Over for Households (B22001)
- ACS 5-year Averages – Race (B02001)
- ACS 5-year Averages – Hispanic or Latino Origin (B03003)
- ACS 5-year Averages – Selected Economic Characteristics (DP03)
- Decennial Census – Total Population (P1)
- Decennial Census – Selected Economic Characteristics (DP03)
- Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD) - LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics Origin-Destination Main File for all employers in NYC

Department of City Planning

- Primary Land Use Tax Lot Output (PLUTO)

Department of Buildings

- New Housing Units Certified by Community District from 2000 to 2023 (from the New York University's Furman Center Queens Neighborhood Profile).

Department of Parks and Recreation

- New York City Vital Parks Explorer

City Council

- City Council's Data Team Analysis on Park Equity and Covid-19

New York University Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy

- State of New York City's Housing and Neighborhoods in 2024

Endnotes

1. The High Line is unique for several reasons. It is owned by the City but is operated and maintained by a nonprofit conservancy, Friends of the High Line. The conservancy's Board of Directors includes many prominent New York City business leaders and philanthropists, and the organization receives its funding primarily from donations. In 2024, Friends of the High Line, Inc. had an annual expense budget of $23.6 million and $122 million in assets. The High Line park is located in affluent, high-traffic areas of the City—Chelsea and Hudson Yards—that have many attractions that bring high-income visitors such as the Whitney museum, the Vessel, and The Shops at Hudson Yards mall. For these

reasons, the success of the High Line cannot be used to predict success of other elevated parks.

2. For the purposes of this report, IBO utilized U.S. Census Bureau estimates from both the decennial census and the American Community Survey 2018-2022 5-Year estimates. IBO used the 5-year estimates because they allow for larger sample surveys at the level of geography IBO reported on—Community Districts—which helps lessen the risk for possible sampling errors.

3. The project area is not a level of geography for which the U.S. Census Bureau reports estimates. For the purposes of this paper, IBO derived the median income for the project area and the north and south portions of the project area by taking median of the median income among census tracts that comprise the project area geographies.

4. Unemployment rates reflect 5-year estimates and therefore include early pandemic high unemployment rates. To calculate unemployment rates, IBO utilized employment status data from the U.S. Census Bureau and divided the total unemployed population by the total civilian labor force (defined by the Census Bureau as “All non-institutionalized civilians who are either employed or unemployed”) for each census tract. Note that the U.S. Census Bureau measure of unemployment rates is calculated differently than rates presented by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

5. This estimate was an average of the four Community District averages, as more granular data was not available.

Credits

This report was prepared by Jan Mendez and Elliot Jackson-Ontkush, with assistance from Wesley Nay* and supervised by Brian Cain and Sarah Parker. Report production by Jan Mendez.

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