Coney Island, Brooklyn (Kings County)
Riegelmann Boardwalk/Beach/People’s Playground – Amusement District

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VISION FOR DOWNTOWN Provide a brief statement of the municipality’s vision for downtown revitalization.

Coney Island, the People’s Playground, possesses a rich history with its iconic landmarks and multi-generation family businesses. Although the neighborhood has been in a prolonged period of revitalization, many of these new developments have grown independent of each other and are lacking connectivity between various aspects of the Amusement District, and beyond, to the greater Coney Island neighborhood. Presently, there is no accessibility to existing citywide bicycle paths, historic connections are not noticeable, and the area is lacking public amenities, including modern comfort stations, cell phone charging stations, or Wi-Fi access. There is limited public art or shaded seating to enable visitors and residents of all ages to enjoy, meander, and experience Coney Island’s past, present, and future. The important role that Coney Island has played historically in the creation of amusements and the People’s Playground are absent from the various levels of recent private and public investment. Through the tenacity of its small businesses and residents, Coney Island has survived the Great Depression, the Great Recession, the 1918 Pandemic, Superstorm Sandy, and now COVID-19. The Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI) grant would help facilitate the necessary dialogue between the various government entities, partner organizations, and community stakeholders in Coney Island to envision and plan collaboratively and constructively, in a way that has not been previously possible.

JUSTIFICATION

Provide an overview of the downtown area nominated for the DRI program, highlighting the area’s defining characteristics and the reasons for its selection. Explain why the downtown is ready for Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI) investment, and how that investment would serve as a catalyst to bring about revitalization.

Coney Island is a neighborhood of 50,000 year-round residents and 150 small, primarily immigrant-owned small businesses in addition to the family-owned seasonal businesses associated with the Amusement District. It is a transit hub with the D, N, F, and Q trains
beginning in Coney Island along with four bus lines and the long anticipated NYC Ferry service scheduled to begin by the end of 2021. Since its inception in 2012, the impetus behind all of the Alliance’s ongoing activities has been focused on turning the foundation of the 2009 Strategic Rezoning Plan to revitalize Coney Island into the blueprint for the path forward, and to realize the dream of turning the People’s Playground as a year-round destination into a reality. The neighborhood statistics are a compelling illustration of the continued need in Coney Island for the area to reach its full potential and the depth of the impact of COVID-19 on the community: according to a 2018 report from the New York City Department of City Planning, Coney Island’s storefront vacancy rate was 14.7% compared to the 11% citywide. During the pandemic, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) reports that one out of every 105 people in Coney Island died of COVID-9 and the Coney Island ZIP code has a death rate of 948.76 per 100,000, 2x+ higher than Brooklyn’s death rate of 413.18 and 2x+ higher than New York City death rate of 404.51. According to the New York Times, unemployment in Coney Island is estimated to have increased to 30% during the pandemic. Challenges lie ahead in reintroducing our traditional annual events and public outreach programs that had been placed on hiatus due to COVID-19 since the 2019 season and achieving economic stability for both the residents and businesses. The Amusement District’s pandemic-related closing for 16 months has adversely impacted the heart of Coney Island’s social, civic, and economic engine.

Before the pandemic, Coney Island was beginning to experience a renaissance of private reinvestment along its commercial corridors, with thousands of new affordable and market rate housing units under development, all of which have commercial space available, resulting in an influx of residents, new business attraction, and potential employment opportunities. Through funding from a NY Main Street grant, the Alliance has engaged BJH Advisors LLC to complete a Market Analysis of the Coney Island Amusement District as a roadmap to guide the revitalization efforts. This mixed-used development augments over a decade of investment, both public and private, in the Coney Island Amusement District and immediate surrounding area.

Today, in addition to the tens of thousands of residents, Coney Island is home to immigrant-owned small businesses, cultural institutions, as well as major New York City anchors such as the Coney Island Amphitheater, the Coney Island Riegelmann Boardwalk, Deno’s Wonder Wheel, Luna Park in Coney Island, Maimonides Park — home to the Brooklyn Cyclones, and the New York Aquarium.

DOWNTOWN IDENTIFICATION

1) Boundaries of the proposed DRI area. Detail the boundaries of the targeted downtown area or neighborhood, keeping in mind that there is no minimum or maximum size, but that
the area should be concentrated and well-defined. Neighborhoods beyond traditional central business districts are eligible if they can meet other criteria making them ripe for investment. Include a map that clearly delineates the area to be included in the downtown revitalization area.

Surf Avenue forms the southern boundary of the neighborhood, connecting the Amusement District with the mixed-use nature of its neighboring corridors. The East end of Surf Avenue accommodates the annual surge of 7 million visitors with a variety of attractions, gift shops, and full-service restaurants. For the purpose of the DRI, we are focused upon the area which directly mirrors the 2009 rezoning: Surf Avenue from West 8th Street to West 21st Street and all gateway streets that provide linkages to and from Surf Avenue to the Riegelmann Boardwalk, Coney Island’s economic engine, and to the greater residential neighborhood. This area is also inclusive of the Stillwell Avenue transit hub.

2) Past investment, future investment potential. Describe how this DRI area will be able to capitalize on prior private and public investment and catalyze future investments in the neighborhood and its surrounding areas. Describe recent planning efforts that support public and private investment in the proposed DRI area.

Since 2000, there has been a variety of both public and private investment in Coney Island to spur the economy and ensure that the Amusement District can serve as a beachside destination for years to come. This investment includes the following publicly subsidized projects, which amount to over $1.5 billion dollars in investment:

- $2.5 Million lighting enhancement to the Parachute Jump
- $4 Million purchase & restoration of the B&B Carousell
- $6.5 Million West 10th Street access improvement
- $60 Million Coney Island Amphitheater
- $30 Million construction of Steeplechase Plaza (a 2.2-acre public space)
- $180 Million in infrastructure improvements
- $227 Million for New York Aquarium’s newest addition: Ocean Wonders: Sharks! and Spineless, as well as improvements and restoration to the facility post Superstorm Sandy

This substantial investment, which does not account for the millions in private funds, has laid the foundation for the DRI to capitalize and build upon them to make Coney Island the most welcoming recreational, beach, and family-friendly destination in New York State.

While the public investment to the Amusement District was intrinsic to revitalizing the area and providing a wide variety of attractions and activities, it has not changed the gateways to the beach, nor has it enhanced or revitalized the uses that line the Surf Avenue commercial corridor
to build upon the District, or extend the liveliness of the amusements from beyond their property lines to the public spaces. The DRI creates the opportunity to revisit the intended purpose for these spaces, optimize their usage by encouraging a sense of place and encourage alternative transportation access while building upon the area’s strengths.

3) Recent or impending job growth. Describe how recent or impending job growth within or near the DRI area will attract professionals to an active life in the downtown, support redevelopment, and make growth sustainable in the long-term.

In addition to the growth in affordable and market rate apartments and other improvements taking place in Coney Island, all of the new developments will have commercial space providing an opportunity to house new businesses and job opportunities within the community. The occupancy of the retail that is being built, and already existing in the area, is crucial to attracting professionals to the area. According to AARP, “62% of millennials and 49% of boomers want proximity to a mix of shops, offices and restaurants.”

The housing boom has been phenomenal, but there are many residents in the Coney Island community that are not prepared or positioned to benefit from the current and future growth of Coney Island. Coney Island’s unemployment rate is estimated to have increased to 30% and the median household income of Coney Island is $24,113, while citywide the median income is over $52,000 (Coney Island Commercial District Needs Assessment). Based on this data and our knowledge from our current workforce development efforts, we know training is a crucial component. Through the proposed DRI we hope to partner with L+M Development Partners who are developing 1,000 units of affordable housing and commercial space to create a workforce cafe that will include a culinary training program for local residents.

Several of the recently completed mixed-use developments have prime commercial space that has not been rented. The future growth of Coney Island in tandem with the current development creates the perfect opportunity for the DRI to have a major impact on how people experience Coney Island, as well as spur business attraction and ensure that more individuals are better prepared for job opportunities that arise.

4) Quality of life. Identify the properties or characteristics that the DRI area possesses that contribute, or could contribute if enhanced, to the attractiveness and livability of the downtown for a diverse population of varying ages, income, gender identity, ability, mobility, and cultural background. Consider, for example, the presence of developable mixed-use

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spaces, varied housing types at different levels of affordability, walkability and bikeability, healthy and affordable food markets, and public parks and gathering spaces.

Coney Island is an area rich with history and potential, exhibiting exceptional resiliency. The neighborhood and businesses have overcome extended periods of high crime rates, Superstorm Sandy, and a 16-month shutdown during COVID-19. Dozens of our businesses are legacy businesses and have existed for decades, and as a neighborhood with more than five landmarks, Coney Island is unmatched in its perseverance and uniqueness. However, the stunning landmarks, beachside landscapes, and skylines dotted with rides and amusements, do not translate to inviting and livable streets. According to a New York City Department of Transportation (DOT) report, “Street projects that improve safety and design and that welcome pedestrians, cyclists and transit riders see higher retail sales. For example, Brooklyn’s Vanderbilt Avenue saw a doubling in retail sales in the three years following installation of bicycle lanes and a tree-lined median, significantly outperforming boroughwide and city-wide trends.”

Coney Island possesses a variety of opportunities for enhancement and development as it is the most densely populated, heavily trafficked neighborhood of Southern Brooklyn. As a gateway to the birthplace of Amusements, the current streetscape leaves much to be desired. There is limited color, light, or engaging directional signage linking visitors to the numerous landmarked sites encouraging a walkable experience to explore and learn about the current community or the historical elements of the bygone days of Coney Island. The amenities, streetscape improvements, and overall vitality of the area we have identified is particularly crucial as the area is experiencing a housing boom and will need to attract tenants to these thousands of units of housing. Walkability is crucial to the economic health of the area and continued revitalization. According to a study by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, areas that have made streetscape improvements see a substantial change in their economics. One example cited were improvements to School Street in Lodi California, which “have helped attract 60 new stores, lowering the vacancy rate to 6 percent from 18 percent and resulting in a 30% increase in sales tax revenues (mirroring increased sales) since the improvements were completed.”

The various stakeholders that would be brought together through the DRI process, with the Amusement District Market Analysis and Commercial District Needs Assessment as its roadmap, will create a strategic plan and a fresh perspective on how the public realm can and should receive investment so that it reflects the engaging and historic area that surrounds it.

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5) Supportive local policies. Articulate the policies in place that increase the livability and quality of life of the downtown. Examples include the use of local land banks, modern zoning codes or New York State Stretch Code, comprehensive plans, Clean Energy Communities or Climate Smart Communities designation, complete streets plan, transit-oriented development, non-discrimination laws, age-friendly policies, and a downtown management structure. If policies that support livability and quality of life in downtown are not currently in place, describe near-term efforts by the municipality to create and implement such policies.

The 2009 rezoning of Coney Island set the foundation for public and private investments envisioning animated streetscapes with vibrant colors and uses. Much of the vision from the rezoning has become a reality with the amusement industry revitalized, private investment taking place, and housing development (both public and private) well underway. All of this growth surrounds or is in close walking distance to the Stillwell Avenue transit hub, making access to transit critical to the growth and success of the area.

One of the prime focuses and goals of the Alliance for Coney Island as a nonprofit organization is to advocate for an improved quality of life for residents and businesses. This spans beyond the boundaries proposed for the DRI. In addition to advocating for such improvements, the Alliance provides supplemental services, markets the area to drive visitorship and attract businesses, as well as produces over 30 free events annually.

In the Alliance’s long-term strategic plan, coupled with the Coney Island rezoning vision of year-round sustainable development, there is a significant gap and identifiable need to create a more inviting streetscape, which directly correlates with an improved quality of life and experience. All residents who commute by public transportation indirectly interact with the Amusement District as it is where the trains and buses depart from, thus any improvements to the aesthetics and access to these spaces, as well as additions and improvements to public amenities, is beneficial to both residents and visitors.

6) Public support. Describe the public participation and engagement process conducted to develop the DRI application, and the support of local leaders and stakeholders for pursuing a vision of downtown revitalization. Characterize the commitment among local leaders and stakeholders to preparing and implementing a strategic investment plan.

In 2018, in partnership with the New York City Department of Small Business Services (SBS), the Alliance conducted a Commercial District Needs Assessment engaging a diverse group of stakeholders including 118 merchants (85% of which are immigrant mom and pop operations run by extended members of a family), and 329 consumers. The Assessment was followed by a Market Analysis study conducted by an independent consultant through funds provided by a $2.1 million grant from the Governor’s Office of Storm Recovery (GOSR), which identified
several areas for corridor improvement on Mermaid Avenue including aesthetics and branded signage that would both encourage and increase patronage.

These two recent initiatives conducted by the Alliance, each required retail surveys and provided an opportunity to engage a cross-sector of community stakeholders, thereby increasing the understanding of the needs of Coney Island merchants and beginning an overdue dialogue about commercial revitalization and economic development. These outreach efforts were the impetus for the Alliance facilitating a forum for like-minded stakeholders to discuss the benefits of a Business Improvement District (BID) for Coney Island. Issues identified for improvement include: commercial district branding and marketing for both Mermaid Avenue and the Amusement District, public safety, sanitation, beautification, business recruitment, parking, and lighting. These are the challenges facing both commercial corridors. The Alliance has begun to address some of the issues: hiring a Supplemental Sanitation team, collaborating with the local police precinct to address safety issues before they escalate, installing security cameras on two corners to increase safety and contracted with the professional services of two Marketing Design teams, one through SBS and the other through GOSR funds, which developed separate brands for each corridor with a unifying thread — Coney Island for Everyone. Additionally, as a grant recipient from SBS’ Neighborhood 360 Initiative, 13 storefront gate murals were created by local artists to bring more art and color to public spaces as well as tree pit plantings throughout the Amusement District helping to beautify the area.

These initiatives and projects have proven that there is a group of stakeholders from the community that are consistently involved and interested in community planning. The existing platforms for community members and elected officials ensure that convening stakeholders for dialogue and visioning will continue to be welcomed.

7) Transformative opportunities and readiness. Describe opportunities to build on the strengths described above by providing a list of transformative projects that could be ready for implementation with an infusion of DRI funds within the first one to two years (depending on the DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION INITIATIVE scope and complexity of the project). Projects may be public or private, and could address economic development, transportation, housing, and community development needs. Project descriptions should include demonstration of readiness, proposed cost and funding sources, and identification of the project sponsor. For private for-profit projects, DRI funds may not exceed 40% of the total project cost (with a 10% bonus available for projects that commit to meaningful carbon reduction goals, including full electrification and net-zero building performance). While DRI funding may be used to cover the entire cost of a public or not-for-profit project, leveraging of investment dollars from other sources (i.e., private, local, federal, or other state sources) is strongly encouraged. Also identify any other transformative opportunities that may be
explored during the planning process, such as reuse of vacant and developable properties and underutilized buildings; projects to address unmet needs in the downtown, including housing, retail, and community services; and activities that will build upon regional strengths and trends. If a loan or grant fund is proposed, please identify who might be an appropriate entity with capacity to manage the fund. If candidate projects have been identified, please include them to demonstrate potential demand for the fund. Funds are typically capped at $600,000. Please note that if your community is selected to participate in the DRI program, projects identified in the application, along with any others that may arise during the DRI planning process, will ultimately be vetted by the Local Planning Committee and the State to determine which projects receive DRI grants.

There are a wide range of projects that can be transformative to Coney Island’s public realm as well as critical to creating a pipeline of qualified local residents for jobs available in the area. As a growing Amusement District, revisiting the public realm through a macro lens is critical to fortifying the area’s economy for the future. Planning with a variety of stakeholders and connecting Coney Island to bicycle access and bicycle parking is of critical importance, particularly since the Boardwalk is not bicycle friendly during the summer season. A comprehensive, user friendly wayfinding signage system and an accessible pedestrian route for the public would overcome issues of seniors and visitors encountering bicycles racing past them on the Boardwalk during the summer while encouraging bicycle ridership as an alternative form of travel to and from the area.

In addition, the access points to the beach and boardwalk from Surf Avenue and the elevated subway tracks can be enhanced by planning and coordination with the New York City Department of Transportation’s “Under the El” program which encourages lighting and public art to make such areas pedestrian friendly, safe, and inviting. Furthermore, focusing upon these access points and working in collaboration with the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (NYC Parks) on shaded seating solutions for the Boardwalk or with the DOT on shaded seating for the streets leading to our iconic beach and Boardwalk, would create a more welcoming atmosphere for our beachside destination. Furthermore, other public amenities like the comfort station improvements, solar powered charging stations on the Boardwalk, and creating a Wi-Fi mesh network will benefit residents and visitors. Unlike much of the rest of New York City, Coney Island is not connected to the LinkNYC network and thus there is very limited free Wi-Fi. This impacts residents and tourists — residents cannot get access to job opportunities or other information if they cannot afford internet or cell phones that include unlimited data, and visitors cannot navigate the area without Wi-Fi, which they can access in most other NYC tourist hubs. The same challenges can be said without the LinkNYC portals, which provide free charging stations and would be helpful to residents and visitors to the Boardwalk. By utilizing solar powered energy we are also focused on a sustainable form of
providing this amenity that does not negatively impact the environment nor cause a strain on City agency resources.

There are opportunities within some of the new developments to create a workforce training space — currently envisioned as a “workforce cafe” providing on the job training in the culinary arts. The realization of this type of facility builds upon several years of visioning by Council Member Mark Treyger as well as part of the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy report led by the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce in 2018. With an on-the-ground culinary training cafe, residents could apprentice and learn skills which then could be applied to the hundreds of job opportunities within the Amusement District. And lastly, the renovation and rehabilitation of the Shore Theater, which has a landmarked façade but has fallen into disrepair for decades, is being considered by its new owners. The pandemic has stalled their plans but an influx of funding from a grant like DRI would enable them to begin the façade restoration, thus preserving a gem of Coney Island’s history and beginning its transformation into what will be Coney Island’s only hotel, making the area more tourist-friendly and assisting in creating an area that can be more than simply a day trip destination.

8) Administrative Capacity. Describe the local administrative capacity to manage this planning and implementation initiative, including the ability to oversee contracts for awarded municipal projects using existing staff and resources.

The Alliance for Coney Island is well-positioned to manage the DRI funding and planning processes. To date, the Alliance has managed a variety of City Council discretionary funding streams, SBS grants, and is currently overseeing a $2.1 million GOSR grant, which is multifaceted with discretionary and capital funding. The GOSR grant has involved a variety of consultant contracts and services, all with the goal of revitalizing Mermaid Avenue. Additionally, the Alliance managed a $50,000 grant from Empire State Development for a Market Study of Mermaid Avenue, and most recently, through a New York State Main Street grant, has engaged BJH Advisors LLC to complete a Market Analysis of the Coney Island Amusement District as a roadmap to guide the corridor’s revitalization efforts.

The Alliance for Coney Island is led by Alexandra Silversmith whose prior professional experience includes working at the New York City Economic Development Corporation (EDC) on a variety of projects including the East New York Industrial Plan, and working in Coney Island since 2011.

9) Other. Provide any other information that informs the nomination of this downtown for a DRI award
Coney Island’s public spaces and connections to other Brooklyn neighborhoods are severely lacking. The DRI provides a unique opportunity to plan collaboratively with community stakeholders and bring some of those long held ideas to fruition. Investment in public space will bridge the gap from the investment in venues and attractions to ensure that the community has a voice, and will interweave the past with the present, creating a more vibrant future for residents and visitors.