As Clock Ticks, Little Opposition to MS 80 Closure

By ALEX KRATZ

If there is widespread opposition to the proposed closure and re-imagining of Junior High School 80, Norwood’s oldest and largest middle school, it was not apparent at a Department of Education hearing on Monday night.

In what amounted to the school community’s last and best chance to voice its opposition to the DOE’s controversial new “turnaround” program, which would dramatically change the makeup of JHS 80, only a handful of people, including one parent, two students and one teacher, chose to give testimony.

Grace Siemar, a 1944 graduate of the Mosholu Parkway school, when it was known as PS 80 and served students from kindergarten to 8th grade, said she was disappointed with the lack of turnout.

“We should have seen fliers on every car and lightpost around the school,” she said, adding that no local elected officials attended or gave testimony (representatives for State Senator Gustavo Rivera and Councilman Oliver Koppell, however, were in attendance). “Everybody should have come out.”

The school’s auditorium, where the hearing took place, was dominated by empty seats. Only about 50 people attended and many were DOE staffers, union representatives or local community board members.

Those who did speak blasted the DOE’s decision to abruptly drop a previous plan to transform the struggling school, commonly known as MS 80, under another improvement model called “re-start,” which was imposed on the school last summer.

“We’re not pawns, we’re people,” said Ricardo Martinez, an MS 80 graduate who lives in Bedford Park.

Many students, teachers and parents say the school was heading in the right direction under the re-start model and behind the leadership of former Principal Lovey Mazique-Rivera, who was suddenly replaced by interim Principal Lauren Reiss last month.

Bronx Unemployment Rate Hits Highest in Decades

By JEANMARIE EVELLY

Editor’s Note: This is the first in a series of stories exploring the issue of unemployment in the Bronx.

Hitting its highest peak in nearly two decades, the Bronx’s unemployment rate reached a staggering 14.1 percent in February — the most recent month for which local data is available — with approximately 77,701 residents in the labor force here unable to find paying work.

Though the borough has been pegged in recent decades as a place of rebirth, having rebounded from the devastation and neglect of the 1970s and 1980s, the Bronx continues to carry the highest unemployment rate of all the counties in New York State, and by a significant margin. The jobless rate for New York City in February was 10.2 percent, and the state’s overall rate was 9.2 percent.

“The Bronx has, historically, had a much higher unemployment rate than most of the other boroughs,” said James Brown, an analyst with the New York State Department of Labor.

But the numbers don’t show the whole picture, experts say. Unemployment rates, by government definition, only count residents who are actively looking for work within the last 30 days. This means the 14.1 percent number does not reflect the actual number of unemployed people in the Bronx.

Struggling to Save a Historic Church

By DESTINY DEJESUS

Due to a lack of funding, the Bedford Park Congregational Church has been struggling to keep its appearance intact. The leaky roof and cracked paint on the walls show the wear-and-tear befitting a 120-year-old historic building and help is still thousands of dollars away.

While the congregation works to raise rehabilitation funds, parishioners are keeping their struggles in perspective.

“We know that a structure is not a church,” said Annette Porter, secretary of the church’s Board of Trustees. “Church is the people, the love for Christ and the ministry.”

The church was founded in 1889. Worshipers met in a parishioner’s home at first, then moved to a hall on 203rd Street. Two years later, in 1891, Edgar K. Bourne, son of the church’s first minister and secretary of the church’s Board of Trustees, “Church is the people, the love for Christ and the ministry.”

The church stands today on Bainbridge Avenue at East 201st Street and is a prime example of a small 19th century suburban church. Over the years, it has received several historically significant donations, including original stained glass windows and a bell from the 1800s.

Inside the crumbling old church, worshipers can view a beautiful, his-
Homeless Nonprofit Faces Probe After Post Story

By JEANMARIE EVELLY

A local nonprofit that advocates for the rights of homeless faces scrutiny after the New York Post ran a story about the group last month, alleging one of its board members gave a “crash course on squatting”— an accusation the organization says is false.

Picture the Homeless (PTH) is a citywide nonprofit headquartered on Morris Avenue in the Bronx, just south of Fordham Road. Run largely by homeless or formerly homeless individuals, PTH works to organize the city’s homeless population, advocating on policy and social justice issues.

On March 22, the New York Post ran an article titled “City-funded activist group teaches homeless how to invade apartments,” saying PTH board member Andres Perez taught a group of outside a Brooklyn housing complex “how to wrest ‘control’ of vacant apartments,” the article reads. It went on to describe Perez telling his audience how to break into vacant, city-owned properties so they could squat there.

A week later, the City Council’s law department requested that the Department of Housing, Preservation and Development, which administers funding provided to PTH, put on a hold on any city funds to the group and to investigate them for wrongdoing, citing the Post story.

But Ryan Gibbs, another PTH board member, said the article was completely false and “inflammatory.” Perez was talking at a protest PTH and Occupy Wall Street activists were holding outside of Brooklyn City Council Member Erik Martin Dilan’s office, Gibbs said, and was merely telling the crowd about his past experiences being homeless.

“He was only speaking from his personal experience,” Gibbs said. “The Post took it and ran with it.”

A spokesman for HPD said the agency is currently “reviewing” PTH’s funding contract, but would not comment further because the investigation is ongoing.

PTH receives city funding through the City Council’s Housing Preservation Initiatives (HPI) program. The group has received $240,000 since 2008, and is slated for another $50,000 this fiscal year. The money is used for affordable housing surveys, town hall meetings, counseling for community members who are a risk of homelessness and providing MetroCards to low-income or homeless residents, according to the city contract.

“No money that we get here goes to homesteading,” Gibbs said.

PTH members protested outside the offices of the Post last Thursday. In a press release, the group accused the paper of “racist, reactionary” news coverage and for having a bias against the homeless. Over the last decade, the Post has published four editorials criticizing the group, calling them “smelly” and “vagrants with lawyers.” PTH says.

The Post ran another story on Sunday, reiterating the paper’s version of events detailed in the first article.

Bronx Unemployment Rate Hits Highest in Decades

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not include large swaths of people who may have given up on the job hunt long ago, or who exited the workforce to go back to school, or raise families. It also fails to consider the population of workers who are off the books—a common practice in the Bronx, where many residents are off the books — a common practice in the Bronx, where many residents are off the books and for having a bias against the homeless.

The borough lacks the kind of industries that lend easily to employment, according to Small. The Bronx’s largest employers are in the healthcare, retail, and nonprofit sectors, which are often the hardest hit during a recession.

“We don’t have a Silicon Valley in the Bronx,” Small explained. “The jobs that are here are largely nonprofit jobs, and to some extent retail jobs. The nonprofit industry is dependent on Washington funding, and the retail sector here in the Bronx continues to struggle.”

The borough took a hard hit over the last few years, shedding several hundred manufacturing jobs when the Stella D’Oro cookie factory closed in 2009, and then Old London Foods, the makers of Melba toast, shut down their Bronx plant just a few months later. Plans to turn the vacant Kingsbridge Armory into a shopping mall, which supporters argued would have boosted the area’s employment opportunities, were killed in 2009 in a fight over wages.

Since then, Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz, Jr., and the Bronx Overall Economic Development Corp. have been courting various developers in attempts to lure them to the borough. This year, an economic truck manufacturing company and online grocer FreshDirect have announced moves to the Bronx, and a new mall — complete with a Macy’s department store — is planned to open in Bay Plaza in the next few years.

But some say the unemployment issue is more systemic, and can’t necessarily be fixed by a few new local businesses.

“It’s largely tied to labor force demographics,” Brown said. “The Bronx’s working age population has a much higher number of people, proportionately, who have not completed high school, and a fairly large number who indicated a difficulty speaking the English language. Unemployment is pretty closely coordinated with education.”

The Bronx’s graduation rate is lower than those of the other five boroughs. In 2010, 47.4 percent of Bronx high school students received their degrees, compared to 65.1 percent of the city overall.

“We have communities in the Bronx where large numbers of folks do not have sufficient formal education,” Small said.

“It’s critical in this labor market to not only have a high school diploma but to have some certified-skills training, or to have at minimum a two-year college degree.”

Mark Naison, a history professor at Fordham University who directs the school’s urban studies program, said the unemployment rate is related to large pockets of Bronx communities where many residents are embroiled in the criminal justice system — either on probation or parole or have criminal records.

“The reality is, people here are just poor, and many of them can’t get legal jobs because of criminal record or legal status. It’s not a pretty picture.”

—Mark Naison, professor at Fordham University