

The Sun

**15-year dream fades in Brooklyn
Environmental test dashes neighborhood hopes for courthouse**

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July was supposed to be the month when 15 years of waiting ended in Brooklyn. When the south city neighborhood finally got the anchor it needs to revive its retail district. When ground finally was broken on a new district courthouse that residents had once expected to see finished before President Reagan left office.

But at the last minute, with contractors in place and a final design approved, the state reversed itself and quietly ruled that the city's 3rd District courthouse will not be built at the corner of Potee and Patapsco.

The decision, news of which has spread slowly from neighbor to neighbor here, leaves Brooklyn, quite literally, with a road to nowhere. And it highlights, excruciatingly, the dangers of delay.

"How can something so basic suddenly be wrong after so many years?" said Doris McGuigan, a Brooklyn community activist. "Sometimes, projects make you feel like you've aged 15 years, but here it's the real thing."

State Sen. George W. Della Jr., a Baltimore Democrat, says: "It's one of those sagas that won't end. It should have been built by now. But I still have high hopes."

Martha F. Rasin, chief judge of the Maryland District Court, confirmed yesterday that no courthouse will be built on the site, a 6.3-acre tract 100 yards southwest of the intersection of Potee Street and Patapsco Avenue -- the main entry to Brooklyn. She said environmental tests completed last month had revealed the presence of methane gas in levels high enough to make future occupants of a new building sick.

A new district courthouse will eventually be built in the city, she vowed. Della held out hope that it could still happen near the intersection.

The state Department of General Services is preparing to test for methane and other toxics on a 10-acre city-owned property adjacent to the state site.

But if those tests, likely to be completed later this year, show methane as well, it is not clear that a courthouse will be built in Brooklyn, if it is built at all. "I understand the frustration, but I thought we used good judgment," said Rasin. "We need a courthouse, and court space, but we need a safe site to build on."

There may be no project in the city that has been so highly anticipated for so long a time.

The Brooklyn Business and Professional Association, now defunct, first proposed the idea of a district court along the neighborhood's Potee and Hanover Street retail corridor in 1982. Over the years, the proposal has been supported by governors and mayors.

Delays and disappointment

But despite that backing, little about the project has been easy. It took the state five years -- until 1987 -- to acquire the old junkyard that was to have been the courthouse site. Then the General Assembly -- deluged with appeals to fund court projects -- waited eight years to fund the courthouse.

Throughout those delays, local business owners who bet on the courthouse ended up playing the fool. Peggy Crocetti, one of the idea's chief supporters in the 1980s, expanded her Italian restaurant -- right next to the courthouse site -- but had to close down for lack of business in 1993. St. John Christian Day School built three new classrooms in 1990 to accommodate the growing population

school officials thought the courthouse would bring.

In the most notorious project, the city paid \$590,000 to build a 75-yard-long connector road to the unbuilt court in 1991. This "road to nowhere," much ridiculed in Brooklyn, includes fire hydrants and streetlights. It sits today, unused and weather-worn, with weeds peeking through cracks in the pavement.

"Everyone who depended on this thing being built has lost," says the Rev. Joe Lettrich, pastor of St. John Lutheran Church and a member of the Ministerial Alliance in Brooklyn and Curtis Bay.

Signs of revitalization

But in recent years, with the General Assembly's decision to fund the project, there were signs of hope. Last year, McDonald's opened a franchise at the intersection's southwest corner, next to the courthouse property. A new CVS drugstore across Pottee Street from the site is nearing completion. Royal Farms plans to open a store nearby in the fall.

"We're disappointed, but we're too far along to stop," says John Kemp, a Royal Farms vice president. "Had we known there wouldn't be a courthouse at that site, we probably would have still gone into Brooklyn."

Despite the bad news about methane, some residents and local officials remain hopeful that the saga could take a turn, for the better. Della, the state senator, says that if Brooklyn is ruled out, the courthouse could be located in a number of other south city sites, perhaps near Harbor Hospital in Cherry Hill.

Judge Rasin, however, cautions that the need for court space is so strong (the courtroom inside the Cherry Hill police station does not have enough seats for defendants) that "we may need to put the courthouse in a different part of the city.

"You can only wait so long," says Jim Bourke, who 15 years ago was taking over the Brooklyn Hardware store his grandfather started in 1925. "A courthouse would bring customers, but I'm a realist. After 15 years if a place is not built, I don't know if we'll ever see it."

Graphics:
MAP
SUN STAFF

Caption:
Long-planned courthouse canceled in Brooklyn

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