New York’s High Line Park: An Example of Successful Economic Development
by John Rainey

The High Line at the Rail Yards, which opened to the public on September 21, is the third and northernmost section of the High Line Park in New York City. Referred to as the High Line, it is a unique ribbon of parkland and civic amenities winding through the city, built on a refurbished, elevated rail line dating from the 1930s that had long been scheduled for demolition.

Now, a decade after a committed group of visionary neighbors and city officials started planning the innovative park, the High Line is one of the city’s most popular tourist attractions. This “thin green line” runs for 1.5 miles near the Hudson River on Manhattan’s Lower West Side and has been called “one of the most innovative and people-pleasing urban reclamation projects in modern history.”

The opening of the High Line at the Rail Yards is the culmination of the project’s original vision: to transform the derelict elevated freight line into an oasis of beauty and peace for all to enjoy. The High Line enables visitors to walk all the way from Gansevoort Street to 34th Street, and with the opening of the Rail Yards, people will all be able to walk the entire length of the High Line – traversing 22 city blocks, uninterrupted, 30 feet in the air, with expansive views of New York City and the Hudson River.
In addition to its unique views of the river and skyline, the High Line features lush gardens and horticulture including hundreds of varieties of flowers, shrubs, and trees; and an abundance of amenities including artworks, sunbathing decks made of reclaimed teak, seasonal food vendors, and an amphitheater for community programming.

The High Line, whose first phase was completed in 2009, came about as a partnership of neighborhood activists, a supportive civic administration, and a public-private funding alliance. The High Line is owned by the City of New York and is operated under the jurisdiction of the NYC Department of Parks & Recreation. The structure was donated to the City by CSX Transportation, Inc. The land beneath the High Line is owned in parcels by New York State, New York City, and more than 20 private property owners.

**An Economic Dynamo**

The Friends of the High Line is the group chiefly responsible for the park. The Friends lobbyed city hall for the decaying rail line’s preservation and transformation with an argument that, according to its estimates, a park in the sky at that location would boost the city’s tax revenues by approximately $250 million over 20 years, due to increased local real estate values. It also argued that a novel park about three stories above ground would attract some 400,000 tourists.

The Friends underestimated on both counts. Today, the High Line attracts about four million tourist visits per year, many by visitors from abroad, making it one of New York’s most popular outdoor attractions. And the city now puts tax revenues from the impact of the High Line at about $900 million — not bad for a rehabilitation project that cost the city and individual and business donors about $260 million to build.
In addition to the soaring real estate values that have boosted cash-strapped Gotham’s tax base, some $2 billion in new economic activity is attributed to the High Line. The High Line district (including the Chelsea neighborhood), long back-on-its-heels, is now one of the hottest markets for upscale residential, retail, and office-center development.

The High Line is a triumph of neighborhood organizing, a visionary civic administration, and a public-private-sector alliance in financing a world-class amenity. It is also a civic jewel that came about with considerable speed: less than a decade elapsed between the founding of Friends of the High Line and the ribbon cutting for its completed first phase.

For a comprehensive overview of the High Line, go to their website at: www.thehighline.org. Also, there is a wonderful PBS documentary on the High Line entitled “The thin green line: Investing in urban parks.” You can view that online by clicking here.

References: Friends of the High Line, PBS, the New York Times, the Toronto Star, National Geographic Magazine, and Wikipedia.