

OPINION

New York Daily News

August 1, 2023

by Layla Law-Gisko

Awful Penn Station plan lingers on Skyscrapers Will Continue to Harm

I spent last Wednesday morning in the courtroom of Manhattan state Supreme Court Justice Lucy Billings listening to lawyers for the state Empire State Development Corp. argue against admitting a transcript from Gov. Hochul's June 26 press conference into the record. The attorneys for ESD were responding to a motion in the lawsuit brought by plaintiffs that include tenants at risk of losing their homes, against the GPP (General Project Plan), the real estate plan to tear down six city blocks around Penn Station.

At the press conference, Hochul declared that she had good news for this community. She said: "I am proud to have the support of our friends behind us as well. So, I think as soon as they see this project, they'll understand that this is something they're going to be very excited about." The community she was acknowledging was there with banners and protest signs. It had not been invited, nor notified. And its members were not really welcome.

The governor gleefully announced that she was "decoupling" the GPP from the Penn Station Reconstruction project. And we were all supposed to rejoice.

I, for one, was skeptical that her announcement amounted to good news. Decoupling is not an administrative process, nor a land use action, but merely a neologism popularized by Gwyneth Paltrow.

The media was perplexed but took it to mean that the GPP had been abandoned by the state. According to headlines, the plan had been shelved, scrapped, dropped and abandoned. I continued to be skeptical. I faced sardonic remarks for being "overly critical." "C'mon, aren't you able to take a win?!" a person involved in the matter quipped. It's not a win, merely a smokescreen, and I am afraid many are getting gaslit.

If we could take the governor's statement at face value, then, this statement must have had legal and administrative repercussions. Attorneys for the plaintiffs, including tenants' groups, filed a motion to have these new facts admitted to the pending lawsuit. That's what last week's hearing was all about. But as plaintiffs' lawyers made the case that the GPP had been abandoned, ESD's attorney belched "Suggesting that the plan has been abandoned is completely untrue. [...] nothing has changed."

When I heard him say that I thought of Hochul's reassuring and cheerful tone a month prior, telling us that once we understood what she was saying, we would be "very excited."

Someone recently asked me if this fight had become personal. The answer is no. It is not personal. It is a matter of public policy. But to me, policy has a face. Policy has a name. The policy pressed by the governor will get our neighbors evicted from Block 780, their lives destroyed. These neighbors have a face. They have a name. Their names are Eugene and Anita, Mirna, Steve, Bill, Joe, Angela, and many more. This policy will make a single real estate developer wealthier. This policy also has his face and his name: Steve Roth of Vornado.

Is it personal for me? No. But it is also not abstract. And while I don't personally know all of the hundreds of residents who will lose their homes, or the millions of commuters who will be cheated of the opportunity to benefit from a tremendously upgraded Penn Station, I know their fate, I know their struggle, and I know their miserable commute.

Separating policies from the people who will endure them is a convenient way in executive offices to justify harmful decisions. It is often dressed as necessary distance and objectivity. Except that policies have real-life consequences on individuals and communities.

Following the hearing before Justice Billings I thought about how hard it is to fight. How unfairly the scale is tipped in favor of the state. This plan is horrid. It has no demonstrable merits. It is abhorred by all who understand it, except the few slated to benefit from it, directly or indirectly. It is being challenged in court. Now, the governor wants you to believe it is harmless, abandoned, dropped, but don't believe it. It may not be quite alive, but it is certainly not dead. It is a zombie, lurking, ready to inflict tremendous damage.

Until the GPP is killed, declared dead and cremated, I will not give up the fight. Even when I disagree with them, I take my cues from attorneys' statements pronounced under oath in the courtroom rather than from cheery governors. ESD lawyers said, "Nothing has changed." And nor have I.



Law-Gisiko is chair of the Land Use, Housing and Zoning Committee of Manhattan Community Board 5 and president of The City Club of New York.