

The Bradley Cove section of
the Asbury Park oceanfront

PERFECT ALIGNMENT IN ASBURY PARK?

AFTER POLITICAL EXPLOSION, EVERYONE ON SAME TRACK FOR BRADLEY COVE PRESERVATION

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ASBURY PARK — There's nothing we love more than a powerful political explosion with the stakes exceptionally high. We just plow right through it. Nothing like the thrill of threading the political needle to save the day.

That happened in our last issue. A ton of people came out wildly swinging the week before after waterfront developer iStar started to build a new meandering boardwalk in the North End beachfront. But what really happened was the public suddenly envisioned the development of the Bradley Cove area, where iStar can build 15 townhouses stretching from the sewage treatment plant north to near the Asbury-Loch Arbor border. Something we've fought against for a decade.

It's a tricky issue all right. Especially for those like this Publisher, who believe iStar has been a force for good in our city. At the same time, we've consistently called on them to amend the redevelopment plan to trade something from the city in exchange for not developing Bradley Cove. The more public pressure to get iStar to make

this their top priority the better. And we've deployed these pages for years in that service.

The political explosion earlier this month, over this new boardwalk of all things, brought public involvement in Bradley Cove preservation to the highest level ever. This newly energized mass of people — 400 came to the last council meeting and couple thousand signed petitions against developing the North End — demanded that the boardwalk project stop. And that everyone sit down to reevaluate the redevelopment plan for the whole North End area. Istar and the city have now agreed to do that, with a meeting scheduled the day after this paper hits the streets. Even better, iStar issued a statement which sounded to us like they're indeed determined to solve the Bradley Cove preservation issue once and for all.

All good. Everyone is now heading in the same direction. But it sure didn't look that way a couple weeks ago. This whole new group had a lot of obnoxious people brutally trashing iStar who did absolutely nothing wrong in this boardwalk controversy. They followed a redevelopment plan in effect going back decades, and everything has been done totally above-board in open public meetings.

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Our concern was that the brutal nastiness, fueled by ignorance, would spin out of control, as people were going off in all directions in trashing iStar. We honestly envisioned a situation in the end where iStar would say to hell with it and leave — and then Asbury Park would learn what a greedy developer is really like. Because that's who'd buy iStar out. So disagree if you want with parts of the city's legally-binding redevelopment plan, which was put in place long before any of the current players involved. But don't put that on iStar. Overall they've been a remarkably positive force in Asbury Park. Turns out a lot of people agree with that. The positive response I received about those articles last week was the most I've heard in doing this paper for 20 years.

Before this North End controversy spun out of control, this Publisher did what we do best: Blast the shit out of people acting like idiots, and get them to join us here on Planet Earth. It worked. Now, comments from the newly energized people seeking North End preservation — with whom I of course agree — are respectful and constructive toward both iStar and the process. The articles in news media actually read quite well. Everyone involved sounds like serious people.

After this Publisher went ballistic on our front page about the public acting like idiots, iStar's Brian Cheripka made a great statement, which was reported on the triCity-affiliated asburyparksun.com. Here's the key passage in it:

"We support a planning process that will provide a community-based vision for the redesign of the public improvements at the north end boardwalk area and Fisherman's parking lot. This vision is one that can, and should, include a long-term solution for the Bradley Cove development site."

Following Cheripka's comments about working with the city and the public, the leader of the new preservation movement made equally gracious comments in a letter to the editor to the Coaster newspaper and comments on NJ.com. Everyone is now on the same page. For the first time, I think the odds are better than 50-50 that Bradley Cove will be preserved. Of course, the energy of the new people was critical to get this to the top of the agenda. Now, their seriousness of purpose, with the moral authority of respect, should hopefully get us to the goal.

Just so everyone understands this whole issue as we go forward, iStar did everything right procedurally with this new meandering boardwalk plan, which also includes redoing the Fisherman's parking lot near the Loch Arbor border. There was no hoodwinking of anyone. The project was discussed and approved in open public council meetings under a part of the redevelopment plan put in place 15 years ago. IStar got the approval of the DEP, which is tough on beach access and environmental considerations. Plans were submitted in a timely fashion to the city engineer. In fact, when the dust settled, Mayor John Moor — to his great

credit — publicly stated that the buck stops with him and the city should have communicated better to the public about what was going on. In other words, iStar did nothing wrong.

Although I've criticized iStar in the past for not making Bradley Cove preservation their top priority, I'm not going to be an ingrate. Any other developer would have made The Asbury hotel into condos, as was the original plan. IStar initiated a program to train and hire local residents that's employed hundreds there and at Asbury Lanes. The hotel has been the center of progressive political causes, as well as culture through the Danny Clinch Transparent Gallery, which led to Clinch being able to put together the Sea, Hear Now festival. In addition, any other developer would have demolished and built condos on Asbury Lanes. Instead iStar spent millions to rebuild it so it would continue as a music venue to also boost local talent. And sorry children, there was no one around who'd keep writing the checks to keep it as it was — and, yes, it was great, even if it was falling down and not making money at the end. One day you'll understand when you're older why it couldn't keep going.

As for the high rise on the central waterfront, iStar would be skewered publicly from all sides if they didn't build it. Now that they're building it, they're getting attacked by others who don't want it at all. Sorry, it's been part of the waterfront plan for three decades. Actually, I've always been for building it last. But if you're going to build it, iStar did it right: With a world class architect. And they didn't make it all residential. Part will be a boutique hotel, with retail on the ground floor. It's an excellent plan.

As for iStar being responsible for making the city too expensive, give me a break. They've only built the Vive and the Monroe — don't tell me that's what's driven real estate prices up for the past decade. The Asbury hotel sure hasn't. Instead, look in the mirror. Prices have gone up because the city has gotten more popular and everyone is seeking the highest prices for their homes they can get — including some who came to the council meeting earlier this month to trash iStar. Everyone's greed, so to speak, is what's driving prices up. Sorry to break the news to you about the laws of economics and the nature of human behavior.

So, sure, disagree with the binding redevelopment plan put in place years ago. But don't put that on iStar. Amending the plan can be done — but it can be a pain in some cases because it's a contract that has to be renegotiated. Just understand that. And, of course, criticize iStar if there's something you don't like they do. But do it in the context of what they've also brought to the table. Be strong, but be fair.

If everyone does all that, our city will move forward in a collaborative fashion, with the best outcomes — and the most public input.

