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## Flatbush Designs a Fight Against Poverty

Darren Sands for *City Limits* | March 28, 2012 2:02 PM

When the last of her babies was picked up from the daycare she runs, Cindy Vielle decided to forgo dinner, dart out of the door and head to PS 269. Dina Dathan's nine-year-old granddaughter, Destiny, literally dragged her there: A student at the school, Destiny insisted on her weary grandmother's attendance. ("So you'll leave me alone, I'll go," she sighed.)

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Inside, a group of immigrants recently arrived from Haiti packed three tables in a small cafeteria, eventually telling a facilitator — in Creole — that they needed affordable daycare and free dental and prenatal health services. "The rents also," facilitator Annette Michelus said, "are killing them."

They were among 200 residents the [CAMBA](#) organization invited to come up with a wish-list of institutions, services and reforms they thought their community needed at the Flatbush Promise Neighborhood Initiative Town Hall Meeting on March 8, phase-one of a \$500,000 planning grant the organization won in December from the federal government.



Cindy Vielle at the daycare she operates. Her hopes for the neighborhood revolve around reading. She'd love a new library and a bookstore. *City Limits/Pearl Gabel*

If the plan CAMBA produces is approved in Washington, it will lead to a \$30 million federal implementation grant under the Promise Neighborhood program, the linchpin Obama administration antipoverty program modeled after the neighborhood-focused, cradle-to-college approach of the [Harlem Children's Zone](#).

"The goal during the planning is to develop an implementation grant, and only five of those will be awarded next year," Joanne Oplustil, CAMBA's

executive director, explained to the audience in her opening remarks that night. "It's very, very competitive, so we're all going to have to work very hard together to make this happen."

### On pols' radar screens

CAMBA, one of Brooklyn's largest human services organizations, brought in State Senator Kevin Parker, and Assemblywoman Rhoda Jacobs to address attendees, but neither seemed to increase the level of excitement quite like embattled City Comptroller John Liu. "I know he's going to give us some money or something like that," Oplustil said, buoyed by laughter and applause as Liu approached the stage. "We need a match of, like, \$6 million dollars," she went on, creating an awkward, ironic moment in the proceedings.

But Liu, despite a matching-funds campaign finance scandal that has put a damper on his mayoral hopes, was unfazed: "I knew tonight would be an expensive night," he joked.

If you judged by the buzz in the room, Liu's presence was a not-so-subtle-wink this was serious

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The residents went to work, breaking into groups of eight to twelve to discuss hot-button issues like education, health care and public safety. Red stickers were placed next to items and services they believed did not exist in their neighborhood. (“*Credit services?*” one woman deadpanned to laughter. “Definitely not.”) Green stickers were placed next to the items residents thought were already in place.

“Is there anything I can put a green sticker on?” Regina Mitchell, PS 269’s after-school program director Regina Mitchell asked her group, pretending to be incredulous.

“No!” they responded.

“OK, just checking,” Mitchell quipped.

### **Ambitions vs. challenges**

The rhetoric in the groups vacillated between borderline outrage at the lack of community services to humor-filled cooperation. The exchanges within Mitchell’s group and others highlighted the wide chasm between everyday life in this small swath of Flatbush and the goals of the initiative. One of those goals is a high school diploma for all students; the approximate graduation rate for the 2010-11 school year was just 54 percent in Flatbush, according to the Center for the Study of Brooklyn. Another goal is that children live in “stable communities.” But the Dept. of Education reported just 62 percent of students at local schools said they feel safe on school grounds.

According to the Furman Center’s 2010 State of New York City’s Housing and Neighborhoods report, the community board that encompasses Flatbush and Midwood had a 25 percent poverty rate in 2009 but the highest price per single housing unit in the city. It also ranked among the five community boards with the worst crowding and highest incidence of elevated lead levels.

The proposed [Flatbush Promise Neighborhood](#) encompasses a triangle bordered by Clarendon Road to the north, New York Avenue on the east and Flatbush Avenue on the west running from Clarendon down to Avenue H. Parts of the zone overflow this triangle, spreading as far east as Brooklyn Avenue and out to Ocean Avenue on the west.

At the March 8 meeting, facilitators expressed surprise at some of the desires community members delineated, which went beyond bread-and-butter issues: Where was the access to mental health services? What’s being done to make sure our children can participate in the arts? How will we take better care of the homeless? Where can we learn parenting skills?

Oplustil was not surprised at the level of interest. “The people in the community know who CAMBA is and know that we take our work very seriously,” she said, adding that the number of red stickers sent a clear message. “It was a message that we already knew, that’s there’s a paucity of these services and we need to enhance many of them for the development of the community.”

The effort to design a Promise Neighborhoods plan for Flatbush will continue to collect data. The Brooklyn College-based Center for the Study of Brooklyn hopes it can review close to 2,000 resident surveys. It will begin to convene approximately a series of solution-oriented focus groups at PS 269 on health (April 3), community (April 4) academics (April 17), early childhood (April 19). “People have to tell us what they need,” Center for the Study of Brooklyn director Gretchen Maneval said. “There’s no other way.”

CAMBA will analyze the data it gathers, come up with a plan it thinks will work and turn in its grant application by the end of the summer.

Asked if she felt if some of the aspirations voiced at the March 8 meeting were too broad, Oplustil said participatory data hadn’t yet been analyzed. “We look forward to doing that, and with this implementation grant we’ll see what results we can go for. Obviously, we won’t be able to add everything. We need to see what the burning needs are, what resources are already there, and see what everyone can bring to the table. We’ll see what makes sense.” Even if CAMBA fails to get the implementation grant, Oplustil said, the plan will help identify steps the neighborhood can try to

take on its own.

Indeed, the desire for change came in many forms at the planning meeting.

Her daycare's 10 children range in age from six-weeks to five years old and, on any given weekday, Cindy Vielle's little caravan makes a 25-minute walk to either the Cortleyou or Flatbush Library. For Vielle, the prospect of no longer having to cross Flatbush Avenue with her children was enough to double park outside the school—and lock her purse inside her car—to say the Promise Neighborhood was in need of a new multi-faceted, state-of-the-art library.

By then rejuvenated, Dina Dathan proudly pointed out her contribution to the brainstorming session—a children's clinic, a one-stop financial services center, a fitness center—and expressed gladness she had come to “invest in our children's future.” And Annette Michelus finally got the Haitian contingent to talk. “At one point I had to tell them ‘One at a time,’” she giggled.

The energy pulsed and the suggestions kept coming.

“Oh, and a bookstore,” Vielle shouted to no one and everyone as she walked out back out to her car, gesturing toward Flatbush Avenue. “You won't find a bookstore nowhere around here.”

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