

Plazas may be more useful than you think

Community leaders reflect on the benefit of having open spaces



FILE PHOTO

This summer, Community Board 3 held its first-ever outdoor meeting at Diversity Plaza in Jackson Heights.

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by Tess McRae, Associate Editor

They've been popping up all over and elected officials, community leaders and residents are hoping the trend of pedestrian plazas will continue.

Since 2008, dozens of plazas have been installed or renovated in New York City and Queens has gotten a good deal of them.

"I love pedestrian plazas," said Greg Mays, the Parks Committee chairman of Community Board 12. "In places where there is little open space, it provides a fantastic

open space alternatives. I don't know if we have any plazas in downtown Jamaica, but I'd love to see one or two. They are fantastic ideas."

In Western Queens, two major plazas — Diversity in Jackson Heights and Corona Plaza in Corona — got major makeovers.

Since they are so close in proximity, the Queens Museum and Corona Plaza have paired up, resulting in a celebration of culture right in the neighborhood.

"Corona Plaza was done by the [Department of Transportation] with Councilwoman Julissa Ferreras (D-East Elmhurst), the Queens Economic Development Corp. and the Queens Museum involved in programming and the maintenance," said Seth Taylor, director of the 82nd Street Business Improvement District. "It has been a great success and the museum has allowed us to hold some great programs there."

Plazas also attract more foot traffic which, for surrounding businesses, is a major plus.

"Originally, when we were working on Diversity Plaza, there was some push back from the nearby businesses," Councilman Danny Dromm (D-Jackson Heights) said. "Now, since we've had presidential debates, community board meetings and a tree lighting ceremony down there, the businesses are starting to appreciate the increase of people in the area."

In urban areas like Jackson Heights, Jamaica and Corona, plazas are less green spaces than they are town squares where people can sit and enjoy a coffee with friends and family.

"Even when I go to Diversity Plaza late at night I see all of the different ethnic groups sitting down and talking with each other," Dromm said. "It brings people together and lets them share the day's news."

Many plazas, including Diversity, are placed in intersections where a high number of serious car accidents have occurred.

"It was one of the most dangerous corners in the area and we wanted to bring the crash rate down to zero," Dromm said. "When we built the plaza, we had zero crashes."

With Mayor de Blasio taking over, Dromm, Taylor and Mays are confident that plazas will continue to be a large part of the city.

He has already mentioned the possibility of improving the existing plaza in Times Square.