Barclays Center on the Right Track

Fear about traffic impacts has been one of the most contentious issues surrounding the Barclays Center, the 18,000 seat sports and entertainment facility that opened at the end of September 2012 in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn. During the arena’s planning and construction phase, community residents voiced concern that the project, even without the much broader and longer-term redevelopment plan for the Atlantic Yards area, would unleash a traffic nightmare on the surrounding local street network. The project’s developer Forest City Ratner, in concert with Sam Schwartz Engineering, responded by crafting a transportation demand management (TDM) program aimed at minimizing the number of auto trips generated by the project.

Although there has been only a short interval since the project opened and it is premature to make definitive quantitative assessments about the arena’s transportation impacts, preliminary observations broadly suggest that so far the worst-case traffic scenarios have not materialized. On the contrary, anecdotal evidence suggests that the overwhelming majority of attendees of Barclays Center events are not arriving by automobile. Transit utilization during sold-out events. Spillover traffic impacts on surrounding streets appear to be minimal. New York City Department of Transportation’s Downtown Brooklyn Transportation Coordinator Christopher Horones states that “so far we have not seen any major congestion issues directly related to traffic generated by the arena.”

The most obvious explanation for Barclays Center’s low levels of auto utilization is its advantageous location directly on top of 11 subway lines, the Long Island Rail Road, and 11 bus lines. Barclays Center also offers 400 free on-site bicycle parking spaces.

Larry Gould, a Senior Director at New York City Transit, notes, “The arena is built on top of multiple networks – streets, bus lines, the subway, and the pedestrian network.” Its design reinforces its blending with its urban environment; Barclays Center is built to the street edge and fronted by a pedestrianized plaza leading directly into a new subway station entrance paid for by the developer. Gould suggests that “the placement of an arena in the context of all these networks is what makes this project different from Citi Field.” In contrast, Citi Field stadium is located in a somewhat isolated area accessible to several major highways, is ringed by surface parking, and is reached by only one subway line and one Long Island Rail Road line.

Infrastructure, however, only partially explains the project’s success in minimizing automobile trips. Both New York City Transit and Long Island Rail Road have modified their service schedules to accommodate the arena’s event schedule. Jacob Balter, a Manager at Long Island Rail Road, notes that the enhanced LIRR eastbound service now offers departures every 15 to 25 minutes following evening events at Barclays Center.

Even though worst-case traffic scenarios have not yet occurred, there are lingering community concerns about the sufficiency of transit service in both the short- and long-term, the future traffic impacts of the fully built-out Atlantic Yards redevelopment project, and the City’s approach to managing on-street vehicular and pedestrian flow. Daniel Schack, an Associate at Sam Schwartz Engineering, notes that the developer, in coordination with City agencies, will be performing a variety of transportation impact studies in the early part of 2013. These studies will help assess the effectiveness of the TDM program and document the ways that people are accessing the arena.

Adding to the review will be a new community based plan, the Brooklyn Gateway Vision Plan, that was released at the end of 2012. Developed by the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, Prospect Heights Neighborhood Development Council, Park Slope Civic Council, Boerum Hill Association, and the Office of New York City Council Member Letitia James, the plan offers recommendations to address Central Brooklyn’s congested roadways and parking policies, inadequate transit infrastructure, and unsafe biking and walking infrastructure in response to the area’s new and ongoing development.

Terence Kelly, Barclays Center’s Community Affairs Manager, also credits the high level of coordination between the developer, the City’s Department of Transportation, New York City Transit, Long Island Rail Road, and the 78th Precinct of the New York City Police Department. As a result of the service improvements and interagency coordination, event attendees have learned quickly that driving to the arena just doesn’t make sense. Kelly states, “What we are seeing is a general trend where the public understands that public transportation is the only way to get to the arena.”