

Queens tourism efforts deserve officials' attention

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A few weekends ago I visited the Queens Zoo with my daughter, Marisa, and her friend Farrah. A wonderful resource and attraction, the zoo annually faces the city budget ax and at one point last year it faced extinction. The zoo is but one attraction and resource within or adjacent to Flushing Meadows Corona Park.



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If Queens were not within the larger city of New York, many of these attractions, including the New York Hall of Science, would receive the attention they deserve as cultural icons and tourist attractions. Queens and the other boroughs get short shrift when it comes to resources to promote visits by residents and nonresidents.

The city annually signs a contract with NYC and Company, formerly the New York City Convention and Visitors Bureau. The proportion of dollars for promoting tourism in Queens and the three other boroughs not named Manhattan remains miniscule.

And that is better than in the past for a borough that serves as the home to the city's two airports. Each borough gets all of \$50,000 for tourism from NYC and Company — a joke. This money barely support the Queens Tourism Council that operates out of the Queens Economic Development Corp.

Borough cultural institutions, which also include the Queens Museum of Art, the Queens Botanical Gardens, Queens Theatre in the Park and Flushing Town Hall as well as the Queens County Farm Museum, which does not have the same funding status with the city's Department of Cultural Affairs, ought to be marketing in the same way that cities with smaller populations promote their cultural benefits.

Vacation packages to other cities routinely tout admissions to zoos and museums that offer less than the distinctive offerings of those in Queens. Folks in other boroughs can make similar claims. NYC and Company, which seems to spend a lot of time touting a possible Olympic bid for 2012, should work to develop packages for conventioners and tourists who stay at Manhattan hotels that encourage visits to borough cultural sites.

Since I serve on the board of the Flushing Meadows Corona Park Conservancy, I might be partial to opportunities in or near the park. I also enjoy the Farm Museum operated by the Colonial Farm Restoration Society of Bellerose, where I live. More people ought to be provided with knowledge of these and other rich cultural sites.

When I touted a Jets and Olympic stadium next to (or in place of) Shea Stadium, I emphasized the ease of transportation, due to the nearby Long Island Rail Road and the IRT No. 7 subway. Both provide the same easy access to Flushing Meadows Corona Park.

A Queens cultural trolley connects hotels at LaGuardia Airport with park cultural attractions as well as the Louis Armstrong house in East Elmhurst, Historic Jackson Heights and “restaurant row” on Northern Boulevard and adjoining 74th Street and Roosevelt Avenue in Corona.

Private and public support funds this trolley, including that of Deutsche Bank of the Americas Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Arts & Business Council, the city Parks Department and the Queens borough president. It runs weekends between noon and 5 p.m. For information, call 718-592-9700, Ext. 306, or e-mail trolley@QueensMuseum.org.

But we need more than a Queens-based trolley. We need the visitors who stay in Manhattan to venture into Queens and enjoy what we do. For example, while City Hall, the governor and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority grapple with bus issues, including the takeover of private lines that also provide service from Queens to Manhattan, why not look at using mid-day return routes to provide easy access to cultural sites in or near Queens’ largest park?

If properly marketed, the Queens Zoo could attract more than the 220,000 visits, including school groups, it had last year. The city’s budget constrains the yeoman efforts of Zoo Director Robin Dalton and its curator of education, Thomas Hurtubise. In difficult times, it may be hard to argue for more funds for the zoo and other cultural attractions. At the same time, admission revenues help the cultural programs and institutions do more.

The clear Manhattan bias of the city tourism bureau does nothing to foster more visits. And remember, more visits do not mean just more admissions. More visitors on site represent opportunities to attract members and patrons who provide further support for these wonderful places.

When the contract for NYC and Company comes up, borough elected officials ought to press for more resources, money and staff time to promote tourism in Queens. I suspect elected officials from other boroughs not named Manhattan may see a similar benefit in this.

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