

# CIVIC MASTER PLAN FOR CREEDMOOR

QUEENS, NY

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Presented by

## *Queens Civic Congress*

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*The Queens Civic Congress wishes to acknowledge the contributions of the following community leaders for their assistance and participation in the final preparation of this document:*

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# ***INTRODUCTION***

Creedmoor Hospital's campus constitutes one of the most fascinating pieces of real estate in the five boroughs of New York City. Few know much about its physical layout, its interesting history, or how its slow, piecemeal dissolution, if continued, threatens to destroy a golden opportunity for more enlightened and exciting adaptation to new uses for the benefit of all Queens residents.

Therefore, the *Queens Civic Congress* [QCC] calls on the State and City of New York to recognize the essential character of the open space, greenery and uniqueness that the campus of Creedmoor, contributes to the communities of Bayside, Bellaire, Bellerose, Douglaston, Floral Park, Glen Oaks, Hollis Hills, Little Neck, New Hyde Park, Parkside Hills and Queens Village, as part of the greater Alley Pond Park Greenbelt system, the Cross Island and Brooklyn-Queens Greenways.

Furthermore, compliance with Chapter 723 of the Law of 1993 ***requires*** the appointment of a local task force including representatives of the Civic Associations contiguous or proximate to the site, ***before*** any disposition of property at Creedmoor takes place. The Queens Civic Congress urges that its ***Special Committee on Creedmoor*** form the basis of that Task Force with the following:

## ***GOALS and CRITERIA***

All property currently and previously part of Creedmoor dating to its establishment as an entity in 1872, acquisition by New York State in 1912, and subsequent expansion shall be subject to a *Civic Master Plan* which shall have the following criteria and goals for any alternate re-uses:

Preserve the integrity and indivisibility of the 125 year-old Campus

Preserve the existing open space, greenery, and recreational amenities

Provide controlled public access to the greenbelt and ballfields via NYC DPR

Conserve the campus atmosphere by using existing buildings before new construction

Ensure compatibility among existing and future uses

Encourage responsible community-based non-profit use of existing space where appropriate and economically feasible

Limit any new construction to structures conforming in scale, architecture, and density to the existing built environment

Preserve Creedmoor's rich historic heritage through zoning designation as Special District and landmarking as an Historic District

Provide tax revenue to the City through selective re-use options

Prevent destabilization of the surrounding middle-class community

Preserve local air quality and reduce the waste of natural resources

Work within the existing utility infrastructure of the Campus

These formal, comprehensive, ***permanent*** protocols incorporate the potential for current and future land surplusing and reversions of existing sold or leased portions of the original property.

# ***THE CIVIC MASTER PLAN FOR THE CREEDMOOR CAMPUS***

The QCC proposes that any alternative-use restructuring plan to meet the above criteria must preserve the Creedmoor campus intact, *including in the plan not just the 68 surplus acres currently proposed for sale, but all the remaining original property, as extended.*

In the most acceptable scenario, the entire campus would be turned over to a co-operative board that would sell cooperative shares in the buildings. Co-op owners would buy their spaces, but pay a maintenance fee to ensure the maintenance of the grounds and buildings and to purchase their utilities from the central power plant. By including all the remaining Creedmoor acres, there will be no future land use crises with which the community will have to speculate. For any NY State Mental Health facilities that may remain, as well as outside community agencies currently using various portions of the (extended) property, each would then become a co-op owner along with everyone else. In the event of further hospital retrenchment, OMH would sell those shares back to the co-op board. The Board would sell to a new owner whose use would conform to the Master Plan. In the case of current alternative users of former Creedmoor Campus property (i.e.: YMCA, Little League, etc.), any subsequent relinquishing of their property would revert, as per deed restriction, to the Co-op as successor to NYS OMH.

The QCC recommends restrictive covenants be placed on the land, binding both the co-op board and the individual owners that no buildings be demolished, nor any new ones built, unless in conformity with the Civic Master Plan.

The street system would remain, and for all intents and purposes, no one would ever notice that anything had changed, except for the identity of the tenants.

The QCC further recommends that such restrictions include barring heavy retailing and manufacturing. However, a mixed use of residences, offices, schools, and convenience retail (small shops to serve essentially only the campus population) would create an exciting new town community.

*[Civic Master Plan for the Creedmoor Campus, page two]*

Prohibiting heavy retailing is essential to prevent an undermining of several initiatives currently underway in the surrounding community, many of which are State funded, to revive declining commercial strips. These include Queens Village (which has just re-established its Chamber of Commerce), and Bellerose, which has just formed an economic development corporation. The Glen Oaks area has also seen merchant-sponsored drives to organize themselves to bolster the flagging retail strip along Union Turnpike.

The issue of air-pollution cannot be overstated. New York City's failure to meet required federal air standards threatens the imposition of severe sanctions that will be expensive to implement and burdensome under which to live. This plan should preclude development at Creedmoor which will change the good air quality which the Creedmoor campus provides the entire eastern County.

The new concern in the field of architecture regarding "green" or sustainable architecture has, as one of its main tenets, reducing the waste of natural resources. By preserving the buildings rather than tearing them down and rebuilding, this plan saves enormous energy and materials resources.

By the simple act of leaving the campus essentially intact and not increasing population density, the City will not have to invest vast sums to upgrade sewer, water, drainage, traffic control and other services. Since the hospital once hosted a population of between 6,000-7,000, there is probably sufficient services capacity extant to permit reuse along the lines proposed above, without major further investment on the part of the City. Yet, the City will reap real estate taxes it now does not now collect, once the land moves to private ownership.

By preserving the campus-effect, no adverse scenic problems will be created for the adjacent Landmark Queens County Farm Museum, nor will the low-density residential communities surrounding the campus suffer a change in their dominant suburban character. Given that eastern Queens has remained one of the City's most consistently stable middle-class communities, paying taxes but demanding few social services, every effort must be made to support this strength.

*[Civic Master Plan for the Creedmoor Campus, page three]*

By leaving the hospital's remaining mental health services intact, but in the context of a mixed-use community, mental health advocates could achieve a long sought-after goal of removing the isolation and stigma of mental health impairment.

The QCC recognizes that numerous issues require further study. This includes professional assessment of infrastructure, security, traffic, and the unmet service needs of the surrounding community. Such a formal study, resulting in a detailed Final Master Plan for Creedmoor must be completed before any parcelization or other land dispositions take place.

# ***IMPORTANCE TO THE COMMUNITY***

Creedmoor's existence has enormous impact on the surrounding community, though in ways which are subtle.

Its hundreds of acres are mostly open, planted to grass and trees. As such, it forms part of the ecological greenbelt of eastern Queens, along with Alley Pond Park, Douglaston Golf Course, the greenswards paralleling Grand Central Parkway, the Children's Hospital lands (formerly also part of Creedmoor) and the Queens County Farm Museum.

Although not currently used by the public as park land, its ambiance of greenness and spaciousness, help define eastern Queens as suburban, lovely, and livable, and the exclusion from public use of much of its open space needs to be redressed in the Master Plan to accommodate the need for additional recreational park land under NYC DPR. As part of the greenbelt oasis, it is a positive contributing factor to the air quality in New York City which has otherwise failed to meet federal standards. Part of the campus has also been designated by the Department of City Planning for inclusion within the Brooklyn Queens and Cross Island/Laurelton Greenways/Bikeways which will link eastern Queens with alternate transportation corridors, Federally funded under the ISTEA enhancements program.

Creedmoor Psychiatric Center is, of course, a resource for mental health services. While, fortunately, not needed by all residents, it has been providing this needed community service for over 80 years as a good neighbor, in addition to serving as a central community resource location for other important services and agencies.

## ***CONCLUSION***

The joint civic community surrounding Creedmoor stands ready to assist the State in making this plan a reality. This plan will relieve the State of maintenance costs on buildings no longer needed, raise cash on the sale of surplus portions of the campus, preserve the needs of the remaining Creedmoor facilities, **and** deliver to the community a re-use of an enormous piece of land that, far from becoming a bad neighbor, will continue to enhance Eastern Queens as a choice place to live for the *next* 125 years.

# ***BACKGROUND HISTORY***

Begun in 1912, the State approached the development of Creedmoor much as though the site were in total isolation from any civilization around it. It was designed as a totally self-contained community; a virtual new town carved out of vacant land and built from scratch. There are a few buildings that pre-date the hospital, left from the days when the National Rifle Association operated a rifle range there beginning in 1873, and later a practice ground for the NY National Guard until 1910.

In addition to the hospital wards, the campus included its own fire department, sewage treatment settling ponds, key shop, vegetable washing building, freezers, maintenance shops, dining halls, theater, bowling alleys, swimming pool, sports stadium, assembly hall, power plant with its own railroad siding for the delivery of coal, and even its own railroad train known as the Creedmoor Creeper which featured seat belts for the patients who utilized the train for shuttling between sister institutions such as Pilgrim and Kings Park on Long Island.

The campus came complete with an 80-acre farm with barns, garages, root cellar, and all the paraphernalia for feeding itself and even producing a surplus it could send to Manhattan State Hospital. The farm originally contained livestock which were slaughtered and also used for food by the hospital. Its infrastructure includes underground steam tunnels which deliver heating services to all the buildings. Greenhouses provided annuals for the planting beds and a nursery provided trees for landscaping the grounds. It was a complete city for 6,000 or 7,000 people.

Its early buildings utilized two styles of architecture, Romanesque Revival, and American Colonial and incorporate many handsome details. Later buildings were nondescript modern. And of course, there was that Victorian mansion at the corner of Hillside Avenue and Winchester Boulevard which a few years ago was the scene for a Brooke Shields movie.

As the patient population began to decline, the balkanization of the campus began. There was no master planning, just randomly fortunate solutions to a piecemeal decimation of the property.

[Background History, page two]

The land south of Hillside Avenue was the first to go. A chunk was sold to the Hollis-Bellaire-Queens Village-Bellerose Little League which had already been renting the same land which had once been the sewage ponds. Immediately east of the Little League was built the Cross Island YMCA.

In 1975 the Queens County Farm Museum became established on the former farm (now shrunk to 47 acres) by way of a license agreement. Title to the Farm passed to the City in 1982 and it became official New York City Parkland. For that land disposition, the Queens Office of the Department of City Planning formed a Creedmoor Task Force to decide how the land should be used and how it would affect the surrounding community. No other Creedmoor land transfer was accompanied by this enlightened view of redevelopment methodology.

More recently, a small lot was sold to Lifeline, a private mental health organization which reused an existing building.

Another lot was sold to Catholic Charities which built a 50-unit senior citizen housing project, thus portending the possible future of filling Creedmoor open spaces with more buildings, obliterating the greenbelt buffer and totally out of architectural character with Creedmoor or the adjacent residential neighborhood.

This year, we are faced with another 68 acres, larger and more developed than the farm parcel. Yet the City of New York has so far shown no interest in leading the way to ensure that dumping such a large parcel of land onto a mature, built-up area will not have a deleterious effect.

***The time for the CIVIC MASTER PLAN for Creedmoor is now.***

RECENT CIVIC ASSOCIATION ACTIONS  
RE: PROPOSED SALE OF SURPLUS  
CREEDMOOR PROPERTY

*At its last meeting, June 16, the Eastern Queens Civic Council voted unanimously to call for state legislation to require community review akin to the City's Uniform Land Use Review Procedure before the state may sell any Creedmoor land. This has been communicated to City and State elected officials. On June 23, Community Board 13 embraced this position.*

*On Thursday, June 26, the Queens Civic Congress (the successor organization to the Eastern Queens Civic Council) convened a meeting of Civics contiguous to the Creedmoor campus (Bellerose-Hillside Civic Association, Bell Park Manor Terrace Community Council, Creedmoor Civic Association, Glen Oaks Tenants Association, Glen Oaks Village Owners, Inc. Board of Directors, Rocky Hill Civic Association) which developed a consensus to present to all Northeast Queens civics at a special June 30, 1997 meeting.*

*The QCC established a Special Committee on Creedmoor at the June 30 meeting with specific responsibility to develop this Civic Master Plan. The QCC solicited comments and proposals from all civics in the communities surrounding Creedmoor. The QCC Committee convened on July 13, 1997. The Civic Master Plan follows and incorporates the recommendations adopted on June 30.*

*The QCC will formally present this Civic Master Plan for Creedmoor at a meeting of the Queens Borough President's Working Group on Creedmoor, 4:00 p.m., Wednesday, July 16, 1997.*