



UPROSE

Memo to the Obama Transition Team from UPROSE

Elizabeth C. Yeampierre, Executive Director

*Submitted December 15, 2008*

---

### *Introduction*

UPROSE was founded in 1966 and is Brooklyn's oldest Latino community organization. We are dedicated to achieving environmental justice through organizing and advocacy, youth leadership development, and participatory community-based planning. UPROSE is based in Sunset Park, a community that is environmentally burdened by the presence of power plants, waste transfer stations, major highways, and dense truck traffic. Sunset Park is also a rapidly growing community with approximately 125,000 residents, and the overall area of Southwest Brooklyn is home to around 500,000 residents. UPROSE works with a multiracial and intergenerational membership base composed of Sunset Park and Southwest Brooklyn residents, business owners and workers to fight against environmental burdens in the community, as well as to advocate for environmental amenities such as green and open space, reduced truck traffic along our industrial waterfront, and improved air quality.

UPROSE is proud of our involvement in and achievement of a multitude of milestone accomplishments on behalf of our community in recent years. These include the following:

- Helped secure \$8.6 million in federal funds for implementation of community-led Greenway-Blueway design
- Recognized at the United Nations at a youth event entitled "Healing Our Planet: Youth Take Action for Environmental Responsibility" in honor of Kenyan environmentalist Wangari Maathai



## UPROSE

- Secured commitment from NYPA for one million dollars for pollution reduction programs for Sunset Park and are in the process of purchasing 4 hybrid minibuses for our community partners
- Defeated plans for siting of 520 megawatt power plant
- Held alternative fuels summit for waterfront manufacturers

While working in our local community represents a large portion of our work, UPROSE also works closely with a range of environmental justice organizations across the city and state; and collectively, the New York environmental justice community has won a number of important victories in the past decade. These victories include the passage of Mayor Bloomberg's Solid Waste Management Plan (SWMP), which makes each borough responsible for managing and transporting its own waste, and the passage of New York State's first brownfield legislation.

### *Green and open space*

Sunset Park is in desperate need of green and open space. At present, the amount of open space available for recreation is extremely limited at less than ¼ of an acre for every 1,000 residents. The principal green space that is available for recreation in the community is the park from which the community derives its name: Sunset Park. Sunset Park covers an area of six square blocks—a total of 24.5 acres—and is very much over-utilized. Despite being a waterfront community, the Sunset Park waterfront in its present state is not accessible to the public. Adding additional green space would increase opportunities for recreation and community gatherings, as well as help mitigate climate change.

Working together with Pratt Institute and the community, UPROSE has created a plan to develop a Greenway-Blueway in Sunset Park, and is now working to implement this plan.



# UPROSE

The Greenway-Blueway plan calls for an extended green space within the community to lead to and correspond with a planned waterfront park. Over the course of more than two miles, the Greenway will add approximately 25 much-needed acres of green space to the community. The plan is particularly significant because it is specific to the needs and desires of community members who spent many hours on its development.

### *Sustainable development*

The Sunset Park waterfront is home to an active industrial and maritime community; it is comprised of a combination of industrial plants and facilities as well as hundreds of small and medium-sized businesses. These areas are an important source of employment for the community with thousands of manufacturing and other blue-collar jobs located within them. As part of our efforts to preserve jobs while also improving environmental conditions, UPROSE has worked with local business and industry to discuss ways in which they can make their businesses more sustainable. This includes small things they can do to increase efficiencies and reduce their carbon footprints as well as engaging them in the larger discussion around sustainability and a vision for the waterfront that is mixed-use and includes green and open space.

UPROSE also participates in the New York State Brownfield Opportunity Areas (BOA) Program, and has engaged community members in the process of identifying potential brownfields in our area and articulating a vision for redevelopment of those sites. Our brownfields work is concentrated along the waterfront area, and we hope to be able to revitalize critical sites as models of sustainable industrial development.

### *Gowanus Expressway*



# UPROSE

In another major development-related project, UPROSE is involved in advocating for changes to the existing overhead expressway in Sunset Park. The Gowanus Expressway, which opened in 1941 and was widened in the early 1960s, carries over 200,000 vehicles on a weekday. Traffic on the roadway generates high levels of pollution, resulting in rates of pulmonary/respiratory disease in surrounding areas that are far above the New York City average. The Gowanus Expressway is obsolete and unsafe; it affects public safety by bringing large amounts of traffic onto local streets, and inefficiently channels traffic to and from businesses in the area. It is also a deterrent to economic development and divides neighborhoods. The impacts of the Gowanus Expressway are felt disproportionately in communities of color, making it an environmental justice issue.

UPROSE is a member of the Gowanus Stakeholder Group which advocates for the building of a modern tunnel to replace the burdensome overhead highway. A tunnel would be safer and lead to less traffic diversion, improving public safety. It would significantly reduce air pollution and improve public health, especially if the vent towers were fitted with "scrubbers" to further improve air quality. As New York City is already not compliant with Federal air quality requirements, this kind of investment is critical. A tunnel in place of the highway would also create an opening for sustainable development along the Gowanus Corridor. The area would become more attractive for business and would expand employment opportunities for people in the Corridor and beyond - in particular for communities of color. Neighborhoods would furthermore be reconnected with each other and to the waterfront.

### *The Green Economy*

UPROSE believes that the emerging green economy will provide exciting opportunities for the



# UPROSE

Sunset Park community, and as such, we are working to ensure that members of the Sunset Park community are prepared to participate in this exciting new sector. We are working in coalition with a number of partners including Urban Agenda/NYC Apollo Alliance, the New York City Central Labor Council, and the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies to promote sustainable models of worker training and concrete policies that provide resources for scaled up retrofits. While UPROSE is eager to participate in these conversations, we are also committed to promoting a vision of the green economy that not only focuses on traditional green industries such as brownfield remediation, photovoltaics, or retrofitting, but also serves to make the economy and work opportunities more sustainable and environmentally friendly and healthy for workers and communities.

Our vision of the green economy is part and parcel of our greater vision of sustainability, which means economic and cultural sustainability and well-being as well as that of the natural environment. In particular, as part of our grounding in the principles of environmental justice, it is important that green jobs are defined as jobs that offer a living wage and that new opportunities target low-income communities. In this way, the green economy has the potential to offer ladders out of poverty and improved environmental and health conditions in low-income neighborhoods.

At UPROSE we would like to see this way of thinking applied, for example, to the current public housing crisis. Throughout New York City—and in many other cities across the nation—there is a dearth of affordable housing. Existing low-income housing is often poorly constructed of the cheapest materials that are far more likely to create an unhealthy living environment. Carefully designed housing using smart growth principles, local labor markets



UPROSE

and green materials could effectively spur economic growth in low-income areas and offer safer, healthier living spaces to people who need them.

### *Climate Justice*

Sunset Park is one of dozens of communities in New York City that has been identified as at risk of a storm surge. This means that residents and workers in this community are particularly vulnerable to climate change-related weather incidents and sea level rise. To help address these concerns, UPROSE is currently engaging community members in a planning process to determine how Sunset Park residents can work to mitigate as well as adapt to climate change. This includes everything from committing to reducing our carbon footprints in small but meaningful ways to planning around what we will do in the case of an extreme weather event. UPROSE has already hosted several community meetings to advance this initiative and more meetings are planned for the coming months. In 2009 we will host meetings that are specific to the following constituent groups: 1) youth/schools, 2) local businesses, 3) homeowners, and 4) community leaders. Within each of these groups we will address three areas of principal concern: 1) mitigation/prevention, 2) preparation/adaptation and 3) response. Eventually, we anticipate that we will be able to compile and develop written materials based on solutions proposed by these constituent groups.

### *Youth Leadership Development*

Youth Justice is a large part of what we do at UPROSE. Each year we train hundreds of local youth between the ages of 13 and 21 in community-based organizing and planning. Participants have learned to conduct research, access resources, generate critical and independent literature, and produce educational videos around issues of social and



# UPROSE

environmental justice. This work is significant because it educates and empowers young people while teaching them the importance of civic engagement.

Our newest undertaking for our youth programming is a school-based initiative that teaches young people about the emerging green economy. UPROSE is well-positioned to help provide young people with the information and connections needed to be active participants in the emerging green economy. As climate change drives new green job opportunities, UPROSE is dedicated to helping the youth of New York City claim their place within the green economy, and in turn help achieve environmental justice for their communities. UPROSE has worked closely with local schools in the past to provide environmental justice training for area youth, and we look forward to the opportunity to expand our reach and deepen our involvement with schools through this innovative new initiative.

### *Recommendations*

As a community-based organization with a national presence, we understand deeply how the burdens faced by Sunset Park are particular to the area but inherently connected to those that low income communities and communities of color face around the country and globe. We work to build community-based power locally, and then mobilize that power to affect policy change at the city, state, and ultimately national levels. UPROSE is at the fore of a national movement to raise the voices of those disproportionately affected by environmental burdens and climate change. We look forward to the opportunity to continue our work in our newly changed political landscape, and welcome the chance to provide the incoming administration with our unique perspective.



UPROSE

### *Environmental Education*

UPROSE would like to see more government support for environmental and sustainability education (from recycling and e-waste collection to product stewardship and packaging, to alternative green products, to toxic household cleaning products, to pest management) by grassroots community groups. This kind of investment would stimulate community empowerment and bring about locally-based efforts to improve neighborhood health and sustainability.

### *Transportation*

We were pleased to learn that the new administration has made plans for major investments in public infrastructure. This focus is important for us locally, regionally and nationally. We would like to assert however, that, while bridges and roads are undoubtedly an important component of the investments that need to be made (i.e. the Gowanus Expressway initiative outlined above), it is imperative that real progress be made in the way of public and mass transportation. In New York City, where millions of people rely on public transportation each day, we are seeing services cut as the population continues to grow. Countless subway stations and railways are in disrepair and many areas in the city have poor access to the system. Much of the system is outdated and in need of modernization. Public transportation has to be at the center of any plan for a sustainable future.

### *Development*

At a time when it is so clearly understood that our health and the health of our children is inextricably linked to our environment, it is hard to understand why it is not mandated that all



## UPROSE

growth and development taking place today be carried out in a sustainable manner. Green and open space should be available in all communities and Smart Growth principles should inform all development that occurs today. Nationally, priorities need to be set that favor local communities over private enterprise.