

THRIVING CITY LINE DRAWS HARD WORKERS *Ethnically diverse immigrant haven*

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Body

City Line has always been a **haven** for hardworking **immigrant** families in search of a better life.

For much of the last century, the tiny triangular neighborhood along the Queens border attracted young families from Italy and Ireland eager to buy homes, put down roots and open local business.

Today, the quiet residential neighborhood attracts families from many other parts of the world in search of the same.

"Our church has always been a church for **immigrants**," said the Rev. Anthony Raso, pastor of St. Sylvester's Church on Grant Ave., in the heart of the neighborhood.

"At first, the **immigrants** were from Italy and Ireland. Now they're mostly from the Dominican Republic," he added, noting that today, the church's Spanish Mass **draws** the largest crowd.

Located at the far eastern edge of Brooklyn and often considered part of East New York, **City Line** is surely one of the most **ethnically diverse** neighborhoods in the borough.

The neighborhood's signature low-rise row houses are today filled with **immigrant** families from Bangladesh, Guyana, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and beyond.

And along Liberty Ave., its bustling commercial strip, once-**thriving** Italian bakeries and pork stores have given way to busy Dominican eateries and flourishing West Indian and Bangladeshi grocers.

A new mosque also is going up on Forbell St. to accommodate Bangladeshi families moving to the area.

'United Nations'

"I call it the United Nations here now," said Russ of Russ Shoe Repair recently, inside his old-time storefront on Liberty Ave. - one of the few Italian-run businesses still left in the ever-changing neighborhood. "There've been a lot of changes here."

The walls of his store are filled with Frank Sinatra signs, Mets memorabilia and fading photographs of the neighborhood's former incarnation.

Nestled between Atlantic and North Conduit Aves., **City Line** is named after its location along the Queens border, which zigzags through the neighborhood, down the middle of Eldert Lane, **Drew** St. and 75th St.

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The neighborhood also is sometimes considered to extend several blocks east into Queens and south as far as Linden Blvd.

"It all depends on who you talk to," said well-known activist Anthony Mammina, 63, who for 37 years has lived on Sutter Ave., south of Conduit Ave., outside the more restricted definition of the neighborhood.

Small-town feel

"I lived in City Line before the streets were paved," he added recently. "We never called it anything but City Line."

Similar to the neighboring communities of Cypress Hills and East New York, City Line took off beginning in the early 1900s as the opening of the Williamsburg Bridge and the advent of mass transit allowed families to live farther from the city.

For decades, it was a thriving Italian and Irish neighborhood filled with families drawn to its mix of convenience and a small-town, almost rural feeling.

"It was like being out in the country," recalled Mammina. "You had everything here, but you could sit in front of the house and see a lot of sky."

But like other nearby neighborhoods, City Line's fortunes began to change in the latter part of the last century, when middle-class families left Brooklyn for the suburbs or other parts of the city, and drugs and crime crept in to take their place.

"It got pretty terrible," said longtime community advocate Jean Reynolds, 59, who co-founded the City Line Coalition in the late 1980s to address the secluded, once-quiet neighborhood's growing problems.

"That's why we organized. There was a lot of street dealing and young people hanging around selling drugs."

These days, the neighborhood still has pockets of poverty and crime, but community leaders and local people alike say the community's hard work and the influx of hardworking immigrant families have largely brought it back.

"It's a beautiful neighborhood," said homeowner Mildred Colon, 50, inside Tavera's Cuchifritos, a new Dominican restaurant at Grant and Glenmore Aves.

Maria Marte, a 20-year veteran broker with Century 21 on Liberty Ave., said housing values have shot up in the last five years. In the late 1990s, she said, a typical two-family row house would have gone for about \$150,000. Today, the price has doubled to about \$295,000.

"The market is very strong," she said adding that she is inundated with young immigrant families seeking to purchase their first home.

The influx of new immigrants has also introduced new challenges to the neighborhood.

Though many community leaders say that for the most part the different ethnic groups live harmoniously, others say that at times ethnic tensions flair.

Facing ethnic tension

In one high-profile case last August, a 37-year-old Bangladeshi man was beaten to death by a group of Hispanic teenagers at Liberty Ave. and Forbell St.

"A lot of people are scared," said Burhan Uddin, 49, a Bangladeshi community leader, who noted that many Bangladeshis feel targeted. "We're trying to get more attention and help for the problem."

Successive waves of new immigrants also have put new strains on the community's schools and social services.

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Assemblyman Darryl Towns (D-East New York) said that as the people living there grew older, the neighborhood's social services catered to a mostly elderly population.

Today, the legislator said, more classroom space for the growing numbers of school-age children and more social services geared toward youth and families are a priority.

"It's a community that has been undergoing a lot of change," said Towns. "But it's a **thriving** place." Graphic: **City Line**

Graphic

MATTHEW ROBERTS UNITED WE STAND Longtime **City Line** businessman Russ, in his Russ Shoe Repair shop, gets coffee from friend Lou and pat on back from friend Diane. MATTHEW ROBERTS IT'S A SMALL WORLD From Dunkin' Donuts to Bangladeshi fare, stores on Liberty Ave., **City Line**'s main shopping strip, mirror community's ethnic diversity. MATTHEW ROBERTS MASS APPEAL St. Sylvester's Church on Grant Ave. has always been an **immigrant** church, says the Rev. Anthony Raso. MATTHEW ROBERTS ON THE MARKET One-family, two-story house at 337 Eldert Lane in **City Line** is listed for \$239,000. Housing prices have shot up in the last five years, says Century 21 broker Maria Marte, who reports being inundated with young families looking to buy their first home.

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