

WHAT'S GOING ON NEXT DOOR?

October 17, 2023



By Dan Bergsagel

On your way to the Coop recently, have you noticed the building site next door? Ever wondered what's going on behind that construction fence? Well, I've been digging into the history—and the future—of our neighboring lot.

The short stretch of Union Street from the Coop to the corner of 7th Avenue has been remarkably stable over the last half century, even as the surrounding neighborhood has experienced significant change.

A visitor in the late 1970s would have seen the Park Slope Food Coop, Fire Department Squad Company 1 and Dixon's Bike Shop, with the latter's charming yellow mural painted on the wall directly adjacent to the Coop. Today, everything is largely the same, except that the beloved Dixon's bicycle mural was suddenly whitewashed in summer 2017 to much community furor.

Eagle-eyed members still mourning the loss of the mural may have noticed that the formerly muraled wall itself mysteriously disappeared this spring and was replaced by a construction fence. So what exactly is going on next door?

CHRIS DIXON, CO-OWNER OF DIXON'S BIKE SHOP, REMEMBERS THE SCHOOL FONDLY—ALL FIVE DIXON SIBLINGS ATTENDED ST. FRANCIS XAVIER.

The lot behind the former mural—between the Coop and 774 Union Street—is part of a larger property owned by the Diocese of Brooklyn that connects through the block to 763 President Street. The Diocese's property forms a large L-shape that wraps around the Coop to the south. Starting in 1914, the site housed the St. Francis Xavier School, teaching local children from kindergarten through eighth grade—until St. Francis Xavier closed its doors in 2018 to merge with the Queen of All Saints Catholic Academy in Clinton Hill.



A look behind the construction fencing.

Chris Dixon, co-owner of Dixon's Bike Shop, remembers the school fondly—all five Dixon siblings attended St. Francis Xavier. Chris remembers that his first-grade teacher, Sister Kathleen Sullivan, who had become the school principal by the mid-1970s, readily agreed to the Dixons painting and maintaining the mural on the school's wall to overcome issues with unsightly graffiti.

The wall holds particular significance for Chris Dixon, as behind it lay St. Francis Xavier's school yard, located on the lot adjacent to the Coop. After the school premises closed each evening, Chris and his friends would climb back over the wall into the yard to play games like stickball. Some of the newer neighbors objected and would occasionally call the police to clear them out.

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SITE IMMINENTLY. HOWEVER, THE START OF THE SCHOOL YEAR PASSED BY LAST MONTH WITHOUT THE ARRIVAL OF NEW STUDENTS.

“We weren’t allowed in the yard after school,” Dixon recalls, “but the cops didn’t want us playing stickball in the street either. So, they would tell us to clear out of the yard just until they had gone, when we would simply climb straight back over again and carry on playing.”

Childhood exuberance in that yard was responsible for the scar Chris still bears on his forehead. At that time, there was not only a school, but also a hospital within a few blocks. Dixon’s misadventures were ably repaired at the conveniently located former Samaritan Hospital in the Skene Sanatorium buildings at 759 President Street (converted to a housing co-op in the 1980s).



PHOTO BY MICHAEL BERMAN

A bird’s eye view of the construction lot.

General Coordinator Elinoar Astrinsky explains that, since the school's closing, the Diocese of Brooklyn has undertaken a large internal renovation of the school building. As part of this renovation, it completed work on the [REDACTED] separating the rear yard of the Coop from the former main school building. This work required the Coop to temporarily relocate our composting and recycling storage area into the adjacent former school yard.

The Diocese completed their renovation work and in March 2022 it leased the building to the New York City Department of Education. Coop staff and members had expected a new school to open on the site imminently. However, the start of the school year passed by last month without the arrival of new students, and if members peek through the construction fencing, they will still see an active construction site.

ONCE THE MECHANICAL INSTALLATION WORK IS COMPLETE, THE YARD WILL BE REPAVED AND, CRUCIALLY, THE MASONRY WALL WILL BE REBUILT NEXT TO THE COOP ON UNION STREET.

Surprised by the delay, I reached out to Tamar Smith, a manager in the External Affairs department at the New York City School Construction Authority (SCA), to find out what is holding things up.

Smith confirmed that the school is scheduled to open its doors in 2024. It will serve approximately 450 students from pre-K through fifth grade. The school couldn't open this year because the SCA is completing its own renovations after the Diocese's building work.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL BERMAN

Another angle of the lot.

The SCA is renovating interior spaces—installing new flooring, lighting, updated wiring and electrical systems, updated fire alarm systems and additional bathrooms. The SCA hasn't needed to make any major structural renovations to the building.

The construction work in the former school yard lot isn't a major structural renovation, but rather a trench dug directly next to the Coop boundary wall. The SCA began digging this trench in June this year to install underground piping and conduits for a chiller unit that will be placed in the yard to serve the new school.

Once the mechanical installation work is complete, the yard will be repaved and, crucially, the masonry wall will—the SCA assures—be rebuilt next to the Coop on Union Street. As the school opens its doors next year, members can look forward to the Coop's largest neighbor returning to the important role it played in the community back in the 1970s. Would it be too much to also hope that the Department of Education could bring back the Dixon's Bike Shop mural? Fingers crossed.

Dan Bergsagel is a structural engineer from London. He likes to talk about the unexpected things hiding in plain sight.