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At JFK, Cabbies Could Pump Iron While Waiting

BY ELIZABETH SOLOMONT - Special to the Sun

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A group representing several thousand New York City taxi drivers is mounting a bid to build a health and fitness center in the taxi holding lot at John F. Kennedy International Airport.

The New York Taxi Workers; Alliance, which represents 7,000 of the city's 43,000 licensed taxi drivers, is seeking space and funding for a \$3.6 million building to help address drivers' health needs. It would be constructed in a lot where several thousand of them convene daily while waiting to pick up passengers.

"It's the one site the majority of drivers access at some point within the week," the group's executive director, Bhairavi Desai, said. As many as 6,500 drivers are dispatched from the airport each day, Ms. Desai said, most waiting between one and three hours for fares, time during which they could use the center.

The group's proposal calls for a 7,000-square-foot space that was designed by a group of Hunter College graduate students as part of a JP Morgan Chase urban planning competition. Earlier this month, the Hunter students' proposal won first place and \$25,000 in prize money, which is to be given to the taxi drivers' group.

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According to the plan's outline, roughly half of the building would house a health clinic, including six exam rooms and doctors' offices. The other portion includes a fitness center and a designated physical therapy space. There also would be a small park area.

The Taxi Workers' Alliance became convinced of the location's viability for offering health services when it offered health screenings at the airport between 2002 and 2006.

Ms. Desai said the drivers' lack of health care stands in stark contrast with their health needs, including getting treatment for high blood pressure and the back and joint problems that can result from sitting for hours in a car. In a 2002 health needs assessment, the group found that close to 80% of taxi drivers did not have health insurance. A quarter of drivers said they had never gone for a regular checkup, and Ms. Desai said that for many drivers, time away from work meant lost wages.

The plan hinges on approval from a number of city and state agencies, including the state Health Department and the Port Authority, which owns the land.

"We have this great plan," a student on the design team, Ryan Herschenroether, said, pointing to letters of support from several elected officials, including City Council Member Gale Brewer. "But if the Port Authority doesn't want to back this project, it's kind of stuck in the mud."

The city's Health and Hospitals Corporation, named in the proposal as a possible health provider, also would need to be a willing partner.

Financing the project is another major obstacle. In addition to construction costs, Ms. Desai said she anticipated a \$1.5 million annual operating budget, including a staff of 30.

Ms. Desai said the group plans to compete for city funding, specifically for funds in next year's budget that will create 10 new health facilities in underserved communities.

Another possible funding source could be the Primary Care Development Corporation, a nonprofit group that lends money to organizations providing health care to underserved communities. PCDC introduced the Taxi Workers' Alliance to the Hunter students last year.

"We're ready to go the distance with them," the project finance manager at PCDC, Phyllis Reich, said. She described the drivers as a "needy population" in terms of access to health care. The airport clinic would offer "preventive care, which is so much smarter than waiting until you're in such agony that you have to go to the emergency room," she said.

May 17, 2007 Edition > Section: [Real Estate](#) > [Printer-Friendly Version](#)