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Ethnic Food, Anyone? After Tennis, Flushing Calls

By LYDIA POLGREEN

They sit less than a mile and a single subway stop from one another: the world's best attended annual sporting event, drawing about 620,000 spectators each year, and one of the city's most vibrant ethnic enclaves, packed with restaurants, cafes and shops.

Yet the United States Open, one of the premier events of professional tennis, and downtown Flushing, Queens, remain virtual strangers.

"We haven't had any customers from there," said Chan Loon Foo, manager of J & B Lobster King Restaurant on 40th Road just off Main Street in Flushing, which serves a generous platter for two people of lobster, Dungeness crab, clams, shrimp and scallops for \$69.95, a relative bargain. "We like if they come here, but they never do," Mr. Chan said.

Bill Hansen, who drove in from Glen Rock, N.J., with his 12-year-old daughter, Blair, to watch a few matches at the United States Open yesterday afternoon, said he had never gone to Flushing for a meal, despite going there for tennis at the National Tennis Center for 20 years.

"We love Chinese food," Mr. Hansen said. "Maybe if we knew where to go we'd head over there. But I just don't know much about it."

In a city that is home to six major league sports teams and holds countless sporting events, bridging the divide between spectators and the neighborhoods around sports sites has been a perennial challenge. The debate over what, if anything, sporting events contribute to the economic health of city neighborhoods has heated up as the city contemplates two new major sports venues in downtown Brooklyn and on the West Side of Manhattan.

In northern Queens, the gap between 2.7 million sports fans who attend the United States Open and Mets games at Shea Stadium just opposite the National Tennis Center in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, remains huge, according to a report issued by the Center for an Urban Future, a research institute that focuses on economic development.

"For a long time now thousands of people have been trekking over to Flushing Meadows for the U.S. Open and Mets games, but it seems like we have been missing an opportunity to make a connection to one of the most exciting neighborhoods in the city, downtown Flushing," said Jonathan Bowles, the center's research director and author of the report. "People who go to these events just don't know about Flushing, don't know how close and convenient it is. There is almost no marketing and promotion by the city."

Downtown Flushing was once a quiet backwater in northern Queens. But over the past two decades it has grown rapidly with a huge influx of Asian immigrants, who have opened dozens of restaurants,

cafes and ethnic groceries. Demand for travel agencies, banks and other services has spurred construction of low-rise and mid-rise office space. If Chinatown and Midtown had a baby that grew up and moved to Queens, it would look a lot like Flushing.

The neighborhood's bustling corners are chockablock with shoppers who slurp milky sweet tea through fat straws, savoring the gelatinous black tapioca balls at the bottom of each cup, and snack on warm sweet buns stuffed with red paste.

John Guo, who works at Ten Ren Tea House, said he would like to see more people venture from the sports sites to his neighborhood, but few make the trip.

"Nobody seems to know we are here," he said, stirring a vat of glistening tapioca balls. "Our customers are people from the neighborhood, not outside."

Mr. Bowles said this is largely a failure of marketing. He said that while the city has invested in significant transportation improvements for Flushing, it has not promoted Flushing as a tourist destination to people who are already headed that way. NYC & Company, the city's tourism marketing arm, promotes a United States Open restaurant event, which offers discounts at two dozen restaurants, all in Manhattan. There are no signs at the Willets Point/Shea Stadium stop on the No. 7 train telling visitors that Flushing, with its plethora of ethnic restaurants, is nearby, Mr. Bowles said.

"If more people knew about downtown Flushing, they might venture over there once in a while," Mr. Bowles said.

Chris Widmaier, a spokesman for the United States Tennis Association, which organizes the Open, said the association would welcome the chance to work with the city to promote Queens neighborhoods, but he added that about 40 percent of the spectators come from out of town and most of them stay in Manhattan and tend to eat there.

"Our marketing campaign is broader than one neighborhood, more focused on New York City as a whole," he said.

Fred Fu, who owns a travel agency in Flushing and is president of the Flushing Development Center, said that sports events like the United States Open are economic development opportunities the city keeps missing.

"Flushing is so unique, it has so many different cultures," Mr. Fu said. "We can't let people come and then just leave again. If they know we are here, maybe they will visit, and leave a little money behind, too."