

LAND USE COMMITTEE – MEETING MINUTES

December 2, 2015

Committee Members Present

Wayne Benjamin, Chair
Anita Barberis
James Berlin
Isaiah Bing
Osi Kaminer
Andrea Kornbluth

Committee Members Absent

Steve Simon

Board Members Present

Mary Anderson

Public Member

Vivian Ducat

Public Member Absent

Staff: Deborah Blow

Guests: Rita Gorman, Matthew Spady, Pat Courtney, Shellie Price, Raulito Martinez, Laurie Tobias Cohen, Jim McNiff.

1. The meeting of the Land Use Committee (“Land Use” or the “Committee”) was called to order at 7:10 PM. Land Use Chair Wayne Benjamin welcomed guests, and Committee members introduced themselves.
2. Chair Benjamin provided an update regarding the city’s proposed zoning text amendments, Zoning for Quality and Affordability (“ZQA”), and Mandatory Inclusionary Housing (“MIH”): following the EDC and City Planning presentations in the November meeting, the Committee passed a resolution that rejected the amendments but acknowledged the positive goals of the initiative. This resolution was passed unanimously by the full Board at the November General Meeting. On November 30, the Manhattan Borough Board also voted down the amendments with resolutions that laid out a road map for revising the amendments in a way that the Borough Board could find acceptable. With the Mayor’s office characterizing the numerous rejections of the proposal across the city as “just an opinion”, whether or how the amendments will be revised remains to be seen.
3. Community resident and amateur historian Matthew Spady made a presentation outlining the case for expanding the Audubon Park Historic District, which currently encompasses certain portions of the area between W. 155th Street to the south, W. 158th Street to the north, Broadway and Edward M. Morgan Place to the east, and Riverside Drive West to the west, to include the row houses on W. 158th Street west of Riverside Drive. That section of the street was not included in the original designation in 2009 because the Landmarks Preservation Commission (“LPC”) did not consider it to be part of the sense of place created by the apartment buildings that define the district. The Committee and full Board supported extension of the Historic District in 2009, requesting expeditious action of the LPC, and again in 2010. At the time that the original Request for Evaluation (“RFE”) was being considered, the LPC suggested that the time needed to research the inclusion of the W. 158th Street row would delay the designation process, possibly indefinitely, and so the decision was made to move forward without including the row.

Highlights of the presentation:

- a. Proposed Area of Expansion: The buildings in question are an architecturally cohesive group of 12 row houses located at 626 – 648 W. 158th Street. The buildings were constructed at the end of the 19th century and are a combination of 3-4 different models that work together. The buildings are situated on a steep hill and feature irregular roof lines and decorative door and balcony details. The interior of the building at the west end of the strip was destroyed by fire, but the façade is still intact.
- b. Why Now: Expansion of the Historic District has become a pressing issue as more developers look to Washington Heights for opportunities. Prices in the area have risen steadily for 8 quarters, and are up by 20.4% - more than Brooklyn, and 3 times more than other parts of Manhattan. At the same time, long-time owners are moving or passing away; only 2 of the owners who have lived on the block since the 1970s remain. Some of the new owners are restoring the buildings to single-family homes, and are maintaining the architectural features of the buildings on their own initiative. However, a landlocked vacant lot located behind the buildings poses an additional threat: as an R8 district, a 42,000 – 50,000 sq. ft. building could be built there as of right. (If it were an R7-2 district, the as-of-right building could be as large as 30,000 sq. ft.) Two of the buildings recently came to market, one marketed with air rights, and both were in contract within days. In response to these developments, a group of concerned area residents, Riverside Oval Association members, and Land Use Committee members including Chair Benjamin, Steve Simon and Public Member Vivian Ducat met, in their capacity as community residents, in November to begin the process of creating an RFE for the proposed expansion.

- c. Architectural significance: The buildings were designed and built by John Patrick Leo (1859 – 1923), who was responsible for more than 200 buildings in Washington Heights (north of 145th Street). He was the president of the Builder’s League of New York and commissioner of the New York Department of Street Cleaning, and was friendly with the Grinnell family. In 1896, Leo and his wife Isabelle, having purchased 9 lots on W. 158th Street, signed a covenant with the Grinnells that prohibited apartment buildings on that street. They did not know that the Grinnells were working on Riverside Path, which would separate the row houses from the rest of Audubon Park with a wall in 1905. The covenant with the Grinnells may have reduced the Leos’ return on their investment, but the resulting isolation of the block probably contributed to its survival to the present day.
- d. Historical significance: The buildings were home to significant figures in the history of Washington Heights and Northern Manhattan, including Reginald Bolton (1856 – 1942), a civil engineer, author, and amateur archeologist who was a leader of the Washington Heights Taxpayers’ Association, led the fight to preserve the Audubon House, and was deemed the “Number 1 Citizen of Washington Heights”. His son Guy (1884 – 1979) started his career as an architect, working on the design of the Ansonia on the Upper West Side, but later went on to become a well-known musical playwright.
- e. Community Action: The original RFE for the Audubon Park Historic District was submitted in 2003. It was very thorough, and made it through the designation process in an unusually short time, perhaps boosted by then-Borough President Stringer’s Take Me to the River neighborhood improvement initiative, which included the Audubon Park area. Currently, local residents, elected officials and other stakeholders are organizing around designation of the W. 158th Street row houses, and an RFE concerning the W. 158th Street row houses is nearly complete. Also, an application will be submitted to the Historic District Council’s Six to Celebrate program, which if approved, will further support efforts to make the case of expansion of the Audubon Park Historic District to include the W. 158th Street row houses.

Following the presentation, the Committee and community members continued to discuss the unique historical significance of the street. Chair Benjamin pointed out that there is historical significance in the development of transportation (in the form of Riverside Drive and the subway on Broadway) and its role as a driving force of urbanization in the area. Also, the fact that the construction of Riverside Drive split the neighborhood could be said to foreshadow Robert Moses’s road-building projects, except that here the split helped to preserve the isolated block rather than destroying it.

The Committee also discussed ways in which CB12 could support the RFE and Six to Celebrate application. Mr. Spady noted that while the RFE would generally come to the Community Board’s attention if and when the LPC decides to advance the proposal, it might be helpful to have CB12’s support from the beginning. Because the deadline for Six to Celebrate was looming at the time of the meeting, there was no time to consider a resolution in support of that application. It was recommended that the application stress the Reginald Bolton connection and his work in preservation, and that supporting letters from Andrew Dolkart and Justin Ferate be included as appropriate.

Other points of discussion included the north side of W. 158th Street across from the row houses, which is starting to become more attractive as new trees mask the backs of the apartment buildings, and Safety City at the bottom of W. 158th Street, which does not appear to be used very often.

- 4. Regarding old business, a member of the community noted that the resolution “Not Supporting the Proposed Zoning for Quality & Affordability and Mandatory Inclusionary Housing Text Amendments as They Are Currently Drafted” is not yet posted on the CB12 website. A Committee member inquired about the soccer games that were played at Baker Field last summer, but a community resident was supposed to confirm whether or not these were farm team games and therefore permissible, and so there is no update on this matter.
- 5. After further discussion, the meeting was adjourned at 8:30 PM.

Submitted by Andrea Kornbluth.