

COMMUNITY BOARD 12 – MANHATTAN  
LAND USE COMMITTEE – MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday October 7, 2020

Committee Members Present

Wayne Benjamin, Chair  
Christopher Ventura, Assistant Chair  
James Berlin  
Steve Simon  
Omar Tejada  
Rosy Perez

Committee Members Absent

Juan Guzman  
Domingo Estevez

Board Members Present

Eleazar Bueno  
Mariela Ali

Public Members Present

Vivian Ducat

Public Members Absent

Staff: Paola Garcia, Community Associate

Guests: Manuel Belliard – Office of CM Mark Levine, Dr. Paul Austerlitz, Dr. Ramona Hernandez – CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, Peter Green- Upper Riverside Drive Residents Alliance, Natalie Espino – MBPO, Tim Anderson – MBPO, Matthew Santana, Laurie Tobias-Cohen – Office of Congressman Espaillat, Jhensen Ortiz, Waldemar Morety, Mariel De La Cruz – Office of the NYC Comptroller, Simeon Bankoff – HDC, Joyce Holland, Pat Courtney, Tara Wholley, Jerry Culligan, Lorial Crowder, Nancy Preston, Douglass Pardella, Sharon Pope-Marshall, David Thom,

1) The meeting of the Land Use Committee (“Land Use” or the “Committee”) of Community Board 12 Manhattan (“CB12M”, or the “Board”), held via Zoom, was called to order at 7:08 PM. Chair Benjamin greeted guests and welcomed Committee members. Committee members introduced themselves.

2) **NY Public Library, Fort Washington Branch – National Register Listing**

Chair Benjamin introduced Simeon Bankoff, Executive Director, Historic Districts Council (“HDC”) to brief the Committee on the listing of the Fort Washington Branch of the NY Public Library on the National Register of Historic Places. Chair Benjamin also stated that CB12M just learned earlier that Holyrood Episcopal Church was added to NY State register of historic places and its nomination was forwarded to the National Register.

Mr. Bankoff stated that HDC is the advocate for all of New York City’s historic neighborhoods; its mission is to ensure the preservation of significant historic neighborhoods, buildings and public spaces in New York City, uphold the integrity of New York City’s Landmarks Law, and further the preservation ethic; and that Six to Celebrate is a dynamic program of the Historic Districts Council to recognize the preservation efforts of groups around the city and makes up New York’s only targeted citywide list of preservation priorities.

Mr. Bankoff stated that over the past approximately six years HDC worked to have the Carnegie Libraries of New York City added to the National Register as a class or category of buildings. In December 1899, New York City was awarded a grant of \$5,202,261 (approximately \$160 million in current dollars) from the Carnegie Corporation of New York to build public libraries in all five boroughs. The grant funded the construction of 67 libraries. HDC was successful in its efforts to establish a framework under which individual branches of the Carnegie Libraries of New York City may be nominated for National Register listing. However, the NYS Historic Preservation Office (“SHPO”) requested a test case to ensure effectiveness of the framework. HDC selected the Fort Washington Branch as the test case.

The Fort Washington Branch at 535 West 179<sup>th</sup> Street opened in 1914 and was the 60th library in New York City built with Carnegie funds. Within the New York Public Library system, i.e. not including the separate Brooklyn and Queens systems, it was the 37th of 39 NYPL Carnegie libraries and the 26th and final Carnegie library completed in Manhattan. The completion of this branch marked the end of the primary phase of the NYPL Carnegie program. The build-up to the U.S. entry into World War I precipitated a shortage of building supplies. In response, the Carnegie Corporation began shifting its focus from funding the construction of library buildings to funding library operations and programming. The Fort Washington Branch was the last of a group of five Carnegie branches planned and built in the early 1910s and located mostly in recently developed neighborhoods in northern Manhattan and the Bronx. Unlike many of the earlier Carnegie libraries in New York City, these new branches did not trace their origins to one of the pre-consolidation free libraries, but rather were created to serve new communities.

Concerning the nomination, Mr. Bankoff apologized for HDC not including CB12M, noting that the process became longer and more complicated than initially anticipated. Chair Benjamin reiterated that CB12M and the Committee have expressed support for historic preservation on multiple occasions, as documented in various resolutions, and invited HDC to continue to

communicate with the Committee. He also asked if HDC was involved with the addition of nominating Holyrood Church to the NYS Register. Mr. Bankoff stated that HDC is not involved but speculated that the NYC Landmarks Conservancy might be working to advance the listing.

3) **Proposed 857 Riverside Drive Development Project - Update on Zoning and Related Issues**

The Committee was updated by representatives of the Manhattan Borough President's office, Councilman Mark Levine's office and the Upper Riverside Drive Residents Alliance on the 13-story residential development project (the "Project") proposed for the site of 857 Riverside Drive discussed at the September 2020 LU meeting. Tim Anderson (MBPO) advised that the Department of City Planning ("DCP") was engaged on the various zoning questions raised. Based on DCP's responses, the zoning calculations appear to be correct, although there is an open question on how the width of the site is measured; this impacts the applicability of the Sliver Law. The Department of Buildings ("DOB") interpretation of how the street width is measured is critical to determining if the street (aka the Lower Drive) is considered a wide or a narrow street, and that designation in turn impacts the maximum building height. Mr. Anderson also stated that the MBPO has outreached to but has not yet met with the DOB.

Manuel Belliard representing CM Levine's office stated that the Councilman's office is drafting a letter to DOB concerning the Project, which the Borough President will co-sign. Chair Benjamin stated that Assemblyman Al Taylor advised of his support for the concerns raised by the community and asked to be kept informed.

Peter Green, Upper Riverside Drive Residents Alliance, stated that the former owner of 857 RSD is still in occupancy of the premises but was advised by the new owner that he has to vacate, and if he does not do so by October 15, the new owner will enter the premises and begin demolition activities. Committee member Simon stated that the new owner should be put on immediate notice that this stated course of action is illegal and that the former owner needs to retain legal counsel to contact the new owner in this regard. Chair Benjamin cautioned the LU does not have first-hand knowledge of the conversations mentioned by Mr. Green and therefore a lawyer representing the former owner, or an elected official should be the one to put the new owner on notice.

Mr. Green stated that the former owner is working to obtain legal counsel but needs financial assistance; although he sold the property for \$975,000 the funds all went towards the over \$1,000,000 outstanding mortgage charges that he had accrued. He also stated that 857 RSD was initially thought to be a guest house built by the Audubon family, but given further research it appears to have been built by the owner of a sugar refinery that was located at what is now West 158<sup>th</sup> Street and the Hudson River. That property owner was apparently known to have been an abolitionist; 857 RSD and the sugar refinery may each have been used as part of the underground railroad. If this is verified, it would strengthen the case of designation of 857 RSD. Mr. Bankoff stated that HDC has also been contacted by stakeholders concerning the project and the potential historic significance of 857 RSD.

4) **Proposed Dominican Historic District**

Dr. Ramona Hernandez, Director, CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, updated the Committee on the proposed non-contiguous historic district dedicated to the history of Dominican people in Washington Heights and Inwood (the "Dominican Historic District"). Chair Benjamin stated that the Committee first discussed the proposed historic district in 2019 with Laurie Tobias-Cohen of Congressman Espaillat's office, in the context of exploring two historic districts – an Apartment House District in Inwood and the Dominican Historic District. Dr. Hernandez introduced the team members: Matthew Santana, Jhensen Ortiz, and Waldemar Morety. Collectively, they briefed the Committee on work completed to-date.

Dr. Hernandez noted that unlike other historic districts that focus on a specific physical place, building or set of buildings, the Dominican Historic District is focused on cultural memory, on people, places, organizations and the like that are not related physically but rather have important ties to the history of the Dominican community. Various demographic data and a pilot of an interactive map were presented. The interactive map includes various icons that reveal background information on the item when a user clicks/selects the icon. The Committee noted that the map should be checked for accuracy, noting that, for example, the Audubon Ballroom icon reveals a picture of the United Palace. The Committee posed various questions for follow up by Dr. Hernandez and her team based on the demographic data presented. For example, the census data shows that between 2000 and 2010 Washington Heights and Inwood lost 25,081 people, or 12.21% of the community district's total population, who are classified as Hispanic/Latino, of any race, but not Dominican, Puerto Rican, Mexican, or Cuban. What were the nationalities of these people and where did they go? Also, is the growth of the Dominican communities in states proximate to New York a result of relocation of residents from New York City or direct location to these states and cities from the Dominican Republic or other parts of the USA?

After further discussion Dr. Hernandez invited suggestions and comments from the Committee. Committee member Simon suggested that the district should include Pepe Cuesta's former garage on W. 174<sup>th</sup> Street, which he said was a meeting place for Dominican community leaders in the late 1970s/early 1980s and where he believes they first discussed the formation of Alianza Dominicana. Chair Benjamin asked Dr. Hernandez if she has outreach to community elders, such as Board Member Maria Luna, to obtain their input and include their recollections of community history and events. Chair Benjamin stated that

LU would be extremely interested in reviewing the materials available and providing comments and noted that other CB12M committees, such as Youth and Education and Parks and Cultural Affairs, may also be interested. The Committee further recommended outreach to community elders who can add their recollections and oral histories to the Dominican Historic District initiative. Chair Benjamin thanked Laurie Tobias-Cohen for making the introduction to Dr. Hernandez.

5) **LU Expense and Capital Budget Priorities for FY ‘22**

Chair Benjamin referred to the Expense and Capital budget items adopted by LU for FY 21 noting that each was ranked among the top five by the full Board and suggested that they remain important priorities for LU and the community and should be re-submitted for FY 22 with certain modifications. The FY 21 budget priorities adopted by LU are as follows.

Expense Item:

Dedicate additional planning staff to work with CB12M and local residents to formulate and implement a community-based neighborhood preservation (formerly stated “contextual zoning”) plan for Washington Heights and Inwood, exclusive of any work undertaken in connection with EDC’s recent Inwood Rezoning plan

Responsible Agency: City Planning

Capital Item:

Allocate capital funds to support a planning and development initiative for Washington Heights and Inwood whereby vacant city-owned lots and buildings, or lots and buildings purchased or otherwise acquired by the City in Washington Heights and Inwood, are identified and packaged in one or more Requests for Proposals dedicated to scattered-site infill affordable residential development projects for which affordability is defined by the area median income (AMI) of current CD12 residents.

Responsible Agency: HPD

Committee member Simon stated that the Capital item should be streamlined to enhance clarity. Chair Benjamin recommended modifying the Expense item to also include updating CB12M’s 2007 Neighborhood Planning and Land Use Study. After further discussion, a motion was made (Simon) and seconded (Ducat) to resubmit the FY21 Expense and Capital budget items, as modified, for FY22.

The motion was passed with the following votes:

	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>	<u>Abstain</u>
Committee	7	0	0
Board	0	0	0
Public	0	0	0

The Committee’s FY ‘22 expense and capital budget priority items are listed below.

Expense Item:

Assign additional planning staff to work with CB12M and local residents to update CB12M’s 2007 Neighborhood Planning and Land Use Study and formulate a community-based neighborhood preservation and zoning plan for Washington Heights and Inwood, exclusive of any work undertaken in connection with EDC’s Inwood Rezoning plan.

Responsible Agency: City Planning

Capital Item:

Allocate capital funds to support a development initiative for Washington Heights and Inwood whereby vacant city-owned lots and buildings are packaged in one or more Requests for Proposals dedicated to scattered-site infill affordable residential projects for which affordability is defined by the area median income (AMI) of current CD12 residents.

Responsible Agency: HPD

(NOTE: underlined text is new or modified)

6) **Old Business - None**

7) **New Business – None**

The meeting was adjourned at 9:05 PM.

Submitted by Wayne A. Benjamin