

COMMUNITY BOARD 12- MANHATTAN
LAND USE COMMITTEE- MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, December 1, 2021 (Virtual via Zoom)

Committee Members Present

Wayne Benjamin, Chair
Tanya Bonner, Assistant Chair
Joel Abreu
James Berlin
Steve Simon
Omar Tejada

Committee Members Absent

Board Members Present

Sara Fisher
Osi Kaminer

Public Members Present

Vivian Ducat

Public Members Absent

Staff: Shinelle Paniagua, Community Associate

Guests: Shay Alster (GF55 Architects); Graham Ciraulo; Lorial Crowder (CLOTH); Rafael Escano; Richard Feigen; Karla Fisk; Eugenia Di Girolamo (DCP); Christianne Greiert; Loretta Henke; A Liriano; Stephan Melnick; Nancy Preston; Radaisy Ramirez; Dorca Reynoso; Jeanne Ruskin; Matthew Spady; Genna Westwood (Port Authority of New York/New Jersey); Annie White (DCP)

1. The meeting of the Land Use Committee (“Land Use” or the “Committee”) of Community Board 12 Manhattan (“CB12M” or the “Board”) was called to order at 7:03 p.m. Committee Chair Wayne Benjamin opened the meeting by wishing Committee members and others present Happy Holidays, as this is the last Committee meeting of the year. Committee members introduced themselves. Benjamin noted Committee Member Omar Tejada announced he would be leaving the Board and the Committee after this month. Tejada, who is also the Board Treasurer, thanked Board members for their kind words related to his departure due to current family obligations, and he said he hopes to reapply for the Board in 2023.

Benjamin also noted the absence of confirmed Land Use agenda items this month, noting that possible returns of stakeholders from previous agenda items with updates at the current meeting had been anticipated but had not materialized. These stakeholders included the American Academy of Arts and Letters (“Academy”), and the development team for The Eliza project in Inwood. Benjamin reminded the Committee that The Eliza team had come before the Committee to get support for extended construction hours for Saturdays, and that the Committee suggested that team reach out to neighbors who lived close to the construction site first, and that it is his understanding that the Eliza Team will follow up on this request through the Board’s Housing and Human Services Committee. Additionally, Benjamin also reminded the Committee that the Academy was asked to conduct resident outreach to those whose windows would be blocked by an element of the Academy’s proposed project as currently designed; He noted that the Academy had advised that it was not prepared to come back before the Committee this month.

2. Updates

Benjamin discussed a few important updates. One update was the rejection by the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) of a Request for Evaluation (“RFE”) submitted by Matthew Spady on behalf of the Upper Riverside Residents Alliance/Save Riverside to expand the Audubon Park Historic District beyond the area designated by LPC in 2009 to capture other important historical and cultural structures, including a group of 12-row houses on West 158th Street and 857 Riverside Drive, an 1851 house that historians and activist fear

could be demolished in favor of new development in the area. Benjamin said LPC's rationale was that the buildings in the Audubon Park Historic District as currently designated are stylistically more cohesive, whereas the expanded District would include varying styles, sizes, and periods of development, and therefore, LPC contended that the proposed designation does not rise to their level of what constitutes a historic district. But Benjamin said that each time LPC has rejected a request to consider the designation of the row houses and other expansions of, or additions to the Audubon Park district, the reasons given have been such that people with organizations familiar with preservation dispute the logic of why the expanded district can't be designated because other districts with similar characteristics have been designated in other areas. Benjamin believes it will take more of a political push to achieve the expanded designation, noting that the turnover of LPC's Directors of Research is extremely limited and that unless this Director of Research receives the instruction to alter her views and position on the proposed Audubon Park Historic District expansion, it will not happen.

Committee Public Member Vivian Ducat said every time there is a cultural reason for a historic designation application, LPC finds architectural integrity reasons as a justification for rejection - and it is disturbing. Benjamin said that in the case of the Audubon Park Historic District designation expansion, the Board has felt the cultural and historical was even more important as this area is essentially a time capsule of urbanization of this part of Manhattan and an area that drove certain changes to development patterns. Committee Member Steve Simon inquired about whether LPC has been informed that some of the row houses are in danger of being demolished and that a high-rise building may go up that may impact the historic district itself. Ducat said they have not argued this to LPC. Simon said it is his understanding that LPC is supposed to give priority to developments in immediate danger of demolition. Benjamin said LPC has been inconsistent in this regard. For example, he said LPC has looked at those priorities to step in with the right people connected to the issue in some cases, while in other cases, LPC has contended it is not its job to stand in the way of development. Benjamin also said the LPC has also in some cases looked at the impact of other developments on historical districts nearby. Benjamin suggested Ducat take the lead in drafting a letter regarding this concern so the Board's Chair or District Manager can send the letter to LPC as soon as possible. Simon said the letter should emphasize that the buildings proposed in the expansion application create a cohesive sense of place and having a building directly across from it towering over it will impact that sense of place - and LPC should be concerned about that. Ducat said she will work with Simon on the letter. Berlin clarified that since the letter is essentially a reiteration of what CB12M has already stated in previous resolutions, no new resolution is needed. Benjamin agreed that this is just a follow-up letter.

Benjamin suggests the Committee present a resolution to the Board in January recommending changing the R8 zoning in that area of lower Washington Heights west of Broadway to contextual zoning equivalent, as opposed to the current height-factor zoning. This would not impact allowable density but would prevent the construction of a 17-story building, for example. Benjamin said this is consistent with previous Board resolutions over a decade ago recognizing the potential vulnerability of the area in the future due to development, including the fact that development rights west of Broadway is greater than east of Broadway. He said development projects currently proposed on soft sites west of Broadway, which would be out-of-context but consistent with current zoning, is proof of the need for such a Board position.

Other updates: Benjamin stated he received an email from Annie White of the Department of City Planning ("DCP") on an initiative launched by DCP to obtain input from community members on the principles of good urban design to help define what makes our neighborhoods healthy, livable, and equitable. DCP established a website where anyone can go to and provide their thoughts on what constitutes good urban design for their neighborhoods. Benjamin said he is curious about the origin and intent of the initiative because over years, the Board has made several requests of DCP regarding planning issues and what it sees as important design issues coming out of a neighborhood planning and land use study conducted in collaboration with City College over a decade ago, and because of the Board's experience in getting City Planning to focus on what the Board thinks is good design not getting much traction.

3. NYC Department of City Planning Presentation: “Principles of Good Urban Design” Initiative

Annie White introduced colleague Eugenia Di Girolamo, who is Deputy Director of the Urban Design Division at DCP, and who led the presentation. White said the initiative is intended to be a platform to gather feedback and inform future planning and policies, as well as to have educational material about what DCP does around urban design. White said DCP has been rethinking planning policies about the public realm due to the pandemic and administration changes, including open restaurants and open streets.

Di Girolamo presented a PowerPoint presentation. The DCP website is goodurbandesign.nyc. She said the website has been active since September 16, 2021, and is being used to gather feedback on good urban design and to share tools DCP thinks would be helpful to Boards and any New Yorker in understanding how the built environment can impact their quality of life. Di Girolamo also said the principles of good urban design have already been in existence since created in 2018, but that this initial release was created with the practitioners (architects, landscape architects, etc.) in mind. But during the pandemic lockdown, DCP started to rethink the crucial elements of its work, including principles of urban design and began to rewrite them in a way that would be understandable to all and that would bring all New Yorkers into the process of rethinking the principles.

Di Girolamo then reviewed DCP’s Urban Design principles that say that good urban design “reinforces the sense of place of a neighborhood, supports ease of movement around the city and an accessible public realm, incorporates details that ensure quality, durability, stewardship, and maintenance, and ensures that the city is comfortable, welcoming and feels safe to all.”

Di Girolamo said the goal is to understand if anything is missing from the design principles, and that DCP wants the public to ultimately feel these are their principles of good urban design. A long-term goal is to inform community district needs assessments. Di Girolamo said the website will be open for feedback until January 2022, and after a period of review of that feedback, DCP will release updated principles in the Spring of 2022. She DCP hopes this engagement will be an annual process.

Di Girolamo showed the Committee various aspects of the website, which is written in both English and Spanish. She said the survey for feedback on good urban design takes about five minutes or less to complete. The website also includes a “Community Planning Guide” that provides a roadmap for ways community members can engage in the DCP processes, including the ULURP process. Di Girolamo also said the hope is that this website will encourage more community engagement in city planning processes.

Benjamin expressed concern about the tightness of the feedback schedule for which the deadline is late January deadline, particularly as this is being announced in the holiday season. He wondered if the deadline could be extended to the end of February. Di Girolamo said DCP started sharing information about the website in September, including on social media, and that the agency is currently considering extending the deadline. Committee Member Tanya Bonner suggested the website also be accessible in other languages beyond Spanish, as there are communities where other languages are spoken that areas impacted by urban design issues and development. Bonner also asked how DCP plans to empower communities, and how much power and weight these voices will hold, as not all voices are weighted the same. Bonner said she has seen similar efforts like this, but what happens is that people submit comments that have no impact on ultimate outcomes. Bonner also asked if DCP sought feedback from Community Boards that may have insights due to the challenges they encounter in trying to be heard on these issues. Di Girolamo said the language issue is something they are aware of, but DCP does not have the budget to translate material into every language on this website. But she showed the Committee a Google function tab on the website that allows people to select their language. But Benjamin noted the problem with this tab being in English only. Bonner said the website functionality also assumes literacy in using this technology, which will not be the case for everyone attempting to access this site. Di Girolamo said DCP has been thinking of ways to engage communities in this process other

than digitally. Benjamin noted that if one can navigate a mobile phone they should have no problem navigating the website. She said the agency is working with NYCHA and the Department of Aging to provide paper version formats of the survey to fill out. Benjamin also questioned the weight that will be given to the input received, noting the input the Board has given DCP and LPC over the years was ignored. Di Girolamo said DCP reads every single submission and will use the beginning of the new year to comb through the feedback to understand priorities for neighborhoods and especially to understand what is missing.

Simon said the principles of design would have been helpful in recent Committee considerations of new and proposed developments. He also said architects and developers need to buy into these principles more than anybody else. Benjamin stated that architects and planners have long been proponents of good urban design, the question is the extent to which city government demonstrates support for the same through its planning policies and procedures. Simon suggested the Board link to the good urban design website from its website, and that DCP expand its definition of accessible that is on the urban design website to the definition that is consistent with ADA guidelines. Board Member Osi Kaminer said the website feels more like a feel-good website; it is not clear how much of the input will be taken into consideration and subsequently implemented. Kaminer also inquired about whether DCP will take past Board resolutions into consideration. Di Girolamo said the design principles are deliberately broad, as they need to be embraced by the entire city and are not site-specific. She said the website is a starting point that they hope will get people to want to do more. She also gave examples of feedback DCP has been receiving so far that have been impactful, including climate action that still does not exist in DCP's current principles including, cleanliness of streets, and navigation ease. Benjamin asked how DCP will address site-specific issues since the character and built form of neighborhoods differs citywide. Di Girolamo said they will be gathering and looking at how individual communities are responding. White said this is not the fix-all solution to all the various urban planning problems in the city. This is seeking solutions for a specific problem, the urban design realm, and is not intended to change how we go through the land use or ULURP process. White said a lot of the issues brought up today will still need to be land-use conversations.

4. Old Business

Bonner asked if Benjamin had heard any updates on the requested public hearing on the shelved proposal by Congressman Adriano Espaillat to rename the neighborhoods of Hamilton Heights, Washington Heights, and Inwood "Quisqueya Heights." The resolution sponsored by the Congressman has reportedly shifted his focus from renaming these neighborhoods to establishing a Dominican historic district. Benjamin said he has not heard any updates about the requested Board hearing, is not involved in its scheduling, and understands that Board Chair and the Congressman's Office are coordinating the scheduling of the hearing. He further stated that he contacted Dr. Hernandez to determine if her team was available to provide an update at tonight's meeting on the proposal for a Dominican cultural heritage district that was presented to the Committee in October 2020, but scheduling conflicts prevented Dr. Hernandez from participating.

5. New Business

None

A motion to adjourn was made by Berlin and seconded by Ducat. The meeting adjourned at 8:35 p.m.

Minutes prepared by: Tanya Bonner