



CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD No. 4

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**Public Hearing on the West Chelsea Rezoning Proposal
by the City Planning Commission
at the Tribeca Performing Arts Center
Borough of Manhattan Community College, 199 Chambers Street
April 6, 2005**

**Testimony
by
Walter Mankoff, Lee Compton and Edward Kirkland
Manhattan Community Board No. 4**

SPEAKER: WALTER MANKOFF

My name is Walter Mankoff. I am the Chair of Manhattan Community Board No. 4.

We are reaching the culmination of over 3 years of study and discussion over the rezoning of West Chelsea. I want to thank Chair Burden and the staff of the Department of City Planning for the respectful manner with which our Board and its ideas have been received.

In broad terms, the Administration and our community would appear to have similar goals:

- Residential development with significant amounts of permanent affordable housing.
- Preservation of West Chelsea's historic character and diversity of buildings and population.
- Conversion of the high line into a public park and neighborhood amenity.
- Preservation of the art gallery district.
- Preservation of remaining industrial uses.

Any successful plan would need to be complex and designed to balance conflicting items. For example, the high line conversion and provision of adequate affordable housing requires greater density. The preservation of the character of the adjacent historic district requires less density.

The plan certified by the Commission on December 20, did not go far enough, in our opinion, to insure that these desirable goals would be reached or subsequently retained. We had clear differences in priorities, scale and techniques. Our written statement of February 28 spelled out our critique in detail. We will follow in the allowable 10 day period with a statement on the EIS. We urge you to read both documents carefully.

Recently, DCP issued a series of proposed amendments to the previously certified applications. This is an option you are free to choose. I am pleased to note that the A-Text, as it is known, embodies many of the changes Board 4 had been advocating. Indeed, if adopted by the Commission, the A-Text would need only modest amounts of tweaking to meet the goals of Board 4. A few of my

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colleagues will speak briefly on some of the remaining problems – insufficient affordable housing, density and FAR issues, and protection of the high-line space.

Before closing, I want to touch directly on two changes we seek.

The present zoning plan leaves out from the Special District the area between 11th Avenue and the River and a small section at the very south end of the area. We urge the Commission to extend the district boundaries to fully encompass West Chelsea.

I have already noted our support for the high line. We ask that the Community Board be a part of any governing body of the high-line in order that the community interest is represented.

Our community feels very deeply about this area. We honor its history and the role it played over the years as an industrial center for our City.

We celebrate its buildings, new and old, large and small. We cherish the diversity of its residents, their varied ethnicity, careers and income.

We urge the Commission to respect our knowledge of the area and our plans for the area based on that knowledge. Your support can make a difference.

Thank you.

SPEAKER: LEE COMPTON

Madam Chair, Commissioners, my name is Lee Compton. I am the Second Vice Chair of Community Board 4 and a Co-Chair of the Board's Chelsea Preservation and Planning committee.

The rezoning of West Chelsea must strike a difficult balance among competing issues, including:

- The need for the area to grow and develop;
- The need to provide for the High Line park;
- The need to provide affordable housing; and
- The desire to preserve the characteristics that make West Chelsea a desirable area, including its scale and its desirable uses such as art galleries.

As you know, we voted no on the proposed map and text changes, but we are happy to acknowledge that the subsequent A-Text addresses many of our concerns.

The issue of scale is particularly important for us because Chelsea's low scale is essential to its charm and attractiveness. The tallest buildings in Chelsea are the 220' Fulton Houses and the 280' Starrett Lehigh building, and we believe that these heights should guide the rezoning. Therefore, we have proposed a general height limit of 220' with two exceptions.

- In the north, a 280' height limit is appropriate for the transition zone to the higher buildings in Hudson Yards.
- In the south, a 280' height limit should be set instead of the nearly 400' towers that have been proposed.

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We ask you to remember that the High Line will be an urban park; while it will be open in some areas, in others it will run between, or even through, buildings. Light and air on the High Line is not an argument for buildings that would be nearly twice the height of the nearby Fulton Houses.

We note that the A-Text reflects most of these requested changes, as well as our preferences for heights along Tenth Avenue.

In order to facilitate the development of the High Line as a park, the proposed rezoning creates receiving sites for FAR to be transferred from the High Line corridor. The issue for the community is the balance among the height and density created by this mechanism, the need to transfer the High Line FAR and the strong community desire for affordable housing.

We have requested two changes to the proposed rezoning.

First, we believe strongly that the Basic Maximum FAR in all subareas should be the same as the current FAR; all increases in FAR should be used for the High Line corridor or to create affordable housing. The proposed rezoning increases the Basic Maximum FAR in two subareas, creating great incremental value for property owners without benefiting the community. We believe this should be changed.

Second, we believe that property under or adjacent to the High Line has the potential to enhance the High Line as a park and to be quite valuable. The proposed rezoning permits the transfer of all FAR from the High Line corridor but then permits property owners to buy back 1 FAR, effectively increasing density and reducing the opportunity for affordable housing.

We believe that by requiring property owners to retain 1 FAR you would avoid this cumbersome sell/rebuy procedure, you would encourage property owners to be creative and enhance the High Line, and you would open up more of the receiving sites for the creation of affordable housing.

Finally, as I have said to you before, Madam Chair, you have been well served by your staff, Jeff Mulligan, Erik Botsford, Jaime Oritz and, more recently, Ray Gastil. We are grateful for their work on our behalf and for this opportunity to address you and respond to the proposed rezoning.

The A-Text is a significant improvement over the original proposal, and we look forward to continuing to work with you to improve the West Chelsea rezoning.

SPEAKER: EDWARD KIRKLAND

Madam Chair, Honorable Commissioners:

My name is Edward Kirkland, and I am co-chair of the Chelsea Preservation and Planning Committee of Community Board 4. The Board is glad to support much of these applications, especially the acquisition and design provisions for the High Line, but does have reservations about some aspects as not well designed to attain the purposes of the proposed actions and as having adverse impacts on the existing Chelsea community.

A particular worry of the community is Tenth Avenue, the original shoreline which the Chelsea 197-a Plan identified as historically the lowest point of the community from which the scale rose upward.

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The Board thanks the Department for proposing an A-Text that addresses many of its concerns about the proposed rezoning of the west side of the Avenue immediately adjacent to the High Line:

- Opposite the Historic District height of 80 feet proposed in the A-Text is largely compatible with the largely brownstone-scale character to the east;
- North of 24th Street the A-Text height of 120 feet is generally appropriate to the environment of the lower buildings to the east of the avenue and the open spaces and parks in this section;
- The proposed residential rezoning even at the lower levels of the A-Text still threatens the displacement, if no protections are in place, of an existing diverse residential community north of 21st Street consisting of some 200 units of low-income housing in low redbrick tenements in favor of a new monolithic upscale row.

In other areas concerns about scale are only partially addressed in the A-Text:

- The heights proposed at the north and south ends of the rezoning area risk producing buildings that are out of scale with the expressed goal of making appropriate transitions with the lower scale of nearby parts of Chelsea;
- The scale of buildings proposed near the waterfront threatens to cut off inland Chelsea and indeed the restored High Line from their historical and visual connections with the waterfront.

Indeed, new residential buildings at the proposed scale on every side of the remaining M-zones will inevitably change the character of western Chelsea, increase property values, and bring new pressures on existing uses. This will affect the art galleries, which so far have been expanding in a low-rent and desirably funky area. We urge the Commission to consider means of limiting the impacts on this economic and cultural resource:

- Reduce somewhat the extent of the rezoning near the southern core of the art gallery district and lower the scale nearby;
- Put restrictions on large clubs and big-box retail to preserve a favorable environment and reduce competition for desirable space;
- As a longer-run remedy to discourage such pressures the Commission should review adopting in West Chelsea means of preserving a viable mixed-use district designed to foster desirable uses such as have succeeded elsewhere, as in the now expanded Mixed-Use District in Port Morris.

Planning for West Chelsea will be seriously incomplete without actions by other agencies, as to acquire the High Line and to provide affordable housing. Similarly the Board believes that complete planning for West Chelsea must include actions to preserve the area's extraordinary stock of industrial buildings dating from the industrial hegemony of New York City in the last part of the 19th Century and the first part of the Twentieth. The concentration of rail and water transport in West Chelsea led to the construction of striking buildings of brick, iron, and reinforced concrete that are witnesses to this period. We urge the Commission to support our approach to the Landmarks Preservation Commission and other agencies to provide the mitigation that the EIS makes clear only they can provide.