West Side residents tackle 11th Avenue rezoning

BY CHRIS LOMBARDI

The rezoning of 11th Avenue north of the Javits Center officially began last week, with a public forum co-hosted by Community Board 4 and the Department of City Planning, which are jointly developing a new zoning proposal. After being welcomed by City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, CB 4 members laid out their vision, while local residents asked that the new zoning be far different from the “wall of towers” possibly slated for the Hudson Rail Yards.

Unlike forums for the West Chelsea and Hudson Yards rezonings of 2004 and 2005, the Dec. 18 forum at the Red Cross Building on 43rd Street was not held to review some environmental “scoping document” for an upcoming project such as Moynihan Station, or to discuss zoning changes proposed by City Hall bureaucrats. Instead, as development pressure begins to seep from Hudson Yards northward, Board 4 and DCP were seeking public input on their unusual co-application for the new zoning proposal, hoping to prevent the acrimony and crisis mode that attended those earlier phases of development.

In her opening address, Quinn joked that “I don’t want one inch of my district not rezoned before I leave office,” referring to the extensive rezonings of West Chelsea and Hudson Yards. Calling the co-application by CB 4 and City Planning “very significant,” Quinn added that this co-application was “largely as a result of the work that neighborhood groups and Board 4 did during the recent rezonings, especially the Hudson Yards rezoning, working together as real professionals.” Now, she said, “tonight is an opportunity for people to pool our ideas—for you to devise your wish list for what you’d like to see happen on 11th Avenue. Now not all the wish lists are going to be the same—not the same list you gave to Santa. But starting tonight, we have to compile all of those wish lists,

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and start to come up with a consensus.” She signed off with a cheerful, “I’ll say onward and upward, but you don’t want to say that when your talking about zoning, so—onward and moving forward!”

After Quinn’s welcome and a review of current zoning by DCP planner Erik Sellke, board members outlined their proposal for the new district. Then local residents, led by the West Side Neighborhood Alliance, began to explore their concerns and fears that they would be pushed out by relentless gentrification pressures and asked that any new development be both low-rise and “family oriented,” asserting that it was they who should set the terms of the debate, not the developers already cycling the neighborhood’s “underutilized assets.”

Sellke, whose bosses—Ray Gaskell, head of DCP’s Manhattan office, and Eric Botsford, who had helped with the Hudson Yards rezoning—were in the front row, took the crowd through a PowerPoint presentation, flashing images of the “wide variety of land uses” in the area, from the low-rise, mixed-use five-story walk-ups of the Special Clinton District, to the loft buildings and manufacturing space, and the towers built under the “Clinton Urban Renewal Area.”

The Special Clinton District, Sellke said, limits development to a maximum FAR (floor area ratio) of 4.2, and includes a very unusual and specific limit on height: 66 feet, or seven stories. By contrast, the even older Clinton Urban Renewal District, established in 1969, from 50th to 54th Streets, includes blocks with a maximum FAR of 6.02 and a 125-foot maximum height, along with a few blocks with no height limit and an allowable FAR of 7.52.

“Quickly, Sellke said, referring to the home of many of the forum’s attendees, the Mitchell-Lama high-rise on 55th Street.

As for the manufacturing buildings, Sellke added, “They’re Mi-Si light industrial. That means garages, hotels and distribution centers. Here the allowable FAR is 3; no height limit. And we know that even with such a relatively low FAR, it’s possible to cluster all of it together and build quite high.” Then it was CB 4’s Anna Hayes Levin’s turn at the laser pointer. “A number of years ago,” she said, “we at the community board started getting a stream of calls about ‘underused properties’ on 11th Avenue. We were involved in the Hudson Yards rezoning—all those big buildings going up on 42 Street—and we knew it would push northward. We began working on a set of development principles we hoped would become a zoning proposal.”

Showing the crowd a Google Earth map of the area, Levin outlined CB 4’s vision. Eleventh Ave. can become a sub-district of the Special Clinton District, she said, as a mid-rise residential corridor with an initial limit of 150 feet.

“We know the buildings will be bigger, but we want them to get bigger only in order to build affordable housing, via the inclusionary housing bonus.” The buildings can have ground-floor commercial uses, she added: “Garages, auto shops are okay—we’ve always had them. Retail—the kind that serves area residents. And we want to encourage UPS, Federal Express and the like.” And while she said the board wants businesses that feed the Theater District, “we’re seeing a lot of inquiries about clubs and hotels.”

Levin added that CB 4 also proposes to extend the Special Clinton District’s strong limits on demolition and penalties against tenant harassment, and to recommend that for any new development “20 percent of units have to have two or more bedrooms.”

Following Levin were presenters from the West Side Neighborhood Alliance, who inaugurated the community feedback portion of the evening by highlighting the results of their block-to-block survey of the area.

WSNA’s Elaine Matovich explained that the group had grown out of the 2005 battle against the proposed Jena stadium over the Hudson Rail Yards. “We came from all over the West Side, and we discovered we had the same issues: quality of life, affordability, developers taking over our neighborhood. Because it is our neighborhood,” she said to a round of applause. “I’m the sixth of seven generations living in the same square block.”

As the forum wound down, residents were urged to get involved, both with WSNA and CB 4’s Hell’s Kitchen Land Use Committee. “We’re the people who live here, vote here, pay taxes here, and we should have a say,” said WSNA’s Matovich. “But I urge you to join us.”

One Clinton resident feared aloud that if they weren’t careful and persuasive, they could end up with the feared towers that she sees rising in Chelsea.

“I went to see the models that were on display for the Hudson Yards developers, she said, “I was appalled... These people were anticipating 20,000 new residents! If we don’t act now, this could go up and down 11th Avenue!”