



50 EAST 42ND STREET
 SUITE 407
 NEW YORK, NY 10017
 telephone 212.286.9211
 facsimile 212.286.9214
 web chpcny.org

CHPC Testimony on the Greenpoint Williamsburg Rezoning

Delivered to the City Planning Commission

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Good Afternoon. My name is Frank Braconi and I am here today on behalf of the Citizens Housing and Planning Council of New York. CHPC is a non-profit policy research organization dedicated to improving housing and neighborhood conditions throughout the five boroughs.

First of all, we would like to thank Chairperson Burden and the Department of City Planning's staff, as well as Commissioner Donovan and his staff at HPD, for their valuable work on this plan. The City has proposed a rezoning plan that is thorough, precise, and flexible. CHPC is strongly in favor of the proposal. For a number of years, we have urged the City to rezone underutilized industrial areas to permit other uses; this is one of several rezoning actions underway that will encourage the redevelopment of strategic areas and that will improve the health of the City's economy and the lives of our citizens. We would like to comment today on three aspects of the plan: inclusionary housing, the waterfront access plan, and the mixed-use character of the project.

Inclusionary Housing

We understand that there is a good deal of anxiety in the community about rising housing prices and that many low- and moderate-income households fear that this rezoning will increase their housing insecurity. This is one reason we have called for an inclusionary housing program with explicit neighborhood preferences. But we want to point out that it is not new housing supply that causes gentrification and rising prices—those effects are rooted in the City's changing economy and households' changing lifestyles, factors which are in general positive for the City's future. In the long run, additional market-rate housing supply will relieve, not exacerbate, pressure on the community's existing housing stock. However, to the degree that new development makes the community a more desirable place to live, public policy should seek to mitigate the adverse housing impacts on low-income families.

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We are encouraged by the Inclusionary Housing Program that is a central feature of this rezoning. We believe that inclusionary housing is a technique that can be used more widely throughout the city to ensure that our neighborhoods remain healthy and diverse. The City's willingness to expand its inclusionary housing program beyond Manhattan into lower-density districts, to permit inclusionary bonuses to be creatively combined with other housing programs, to offer developers flexibility in meeting inclusionary goals, and to include off-site and preservation options are all welcome steps that point the way for future zoning innovation.

We recognize that a controversial question in housing policy is whether inclusionary set-asides are mandatory or voluntary. Most realistic housing analysts would agree that, given the present market strength of Greenpoint, and particularly of Williamsburg, some affordable housing could be mandated without adversely affecting development prospects. But we suspect that the inclusionary proportion that could be safely mandated is significantly less than what many others have called for, and in any event that it would be a bad precedent for public policy. The number of affordable units a housing development can support is primarily a function of the rents or selling prices that can be realized on the market-rate units. We do not believe that the City's inclusionary zoning policy should be based on correctly guessing those rents for each and every neighborhood and mandating affordability accordingly. We believe that a consistent, voluntary inclusionary housing program should be established in appropriate zoning districts citywide. When and where conditions are favorable, developers will build the affordable units; when they are not, no harm will be done.

Waterfront Access Plan

While CHPC welcomes the addition of a broader Inclusionary Housing Program in Greenpoint Williamsburg, there are still several areas in which this current plan can be made even stronger. We are especially concerned about access to the waterfront.

The Greenpoint Williamsburg waterfront will be the centerpiece of the project's urban design and will ultimately determine the success of the current rezoning actions. As currently proposed, developers wishing to develop waterfront sites will be responsible for the construction and maintenance of a continuous and publicly accessible promenade. This promenade will be a great amenity for the community but we are concerned about its on-going maintenance and long-term access. Once fully developed, the maintenance of the waterfront, the landscaping and hospitality of its environs, and the security of its users will be the responsibility of a number, perhaps dozens, of different property owners and condominium corporations. We fear that this may produce uneven and inconsistent public space. Section 62-624(d) of the special regulations applying to waterfront areas, however, allows for the transfer of title to the public access areas from the owner of the waterfront site to the City, once the public access area is completed and only if the City consents. We believe that it should be City policy to accept such transfers and that that intention should be made explicit, perhaps in the form of an MOU with the Borough President. Such transfers would ensure that consistent and meaningful public access is maintained.

Mixed Use Zoning and Economic Development

CHPC believes the City has done an effective and credible job of creating flexible mixed-use zones which will allow the retention of currently viable industrial uses yet still allow for the continued growth and expansion of new uses as the market dictates. In many parts of the City, manufacturing uses are increasingly under pressure as housing and other commercial uses increase land rents. CHPC does not believe that industrial land uses should be artificially discouraged or artificially preserved. The MX M1-2 zones included in the current proposal represent an effective way to combine residential and small-scale light manufacturing. Such zones can and should be used throughout the city.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. I am happy to address any questions that the Commission may have.

