City Council approves NYU expansion plan for Greenwich Village

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NEW YORK â€“ An expansion plan by New York University that will transform the historic neighborhood of Greenwich Village with nearly two million square feet of additional space, mostly for students and research, has been approved by the City Council.

The 44-to-1 vote on the NYU plan was the most notable â€“ and contentious â€“ decision by the Council at yesterday's stated meeting.

Lawmakers also approved a bill that sponsors said would bring greater transparency to affordable housing developments paid for by the city and another measure that makes nearly 200 revisions to the plumbing code.

Opponents of the NYU expansion immediately decried the Council's approval of the plan, calling it an insult to the community.

Two of the main groups opposing it -- representing historic preservationists and the other faculty -- have hired an international law firm specializing in land use.

Council members said they had listened to residents and had worked with NYU to trim the size of the plan so that the low-rise nature of the Village would be protected while giving the school room to grow.

“I think this plan appropriately balances the need of an important university to grow and expand — which is good for our city — with the historic neighborhood it’s in," said Council Speaker Christine Quinn before yesterday's stated meeting.

Councilman Charles Barron was the only member to vote against the plan.

Margaret Chin, the councilwoman who represents the neighborhood, said the plan had been substantially modified since it was first proposed by NYU. She emphasized that it was 26 percent smaller than in its initial form.

She said that mechanisms would be created as part of the plan to make sure that NYU is held accountable during the construction. She also said access to open space had been preserved.

"We addressed a lot of the concern that was raised by the community board," she said.

But Andrew Berman, the executive director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, said the plan did not address the main concerns of the community that included affordable housing and the give-away of public land to the university.

"This was really a slap in the face to the thousands of people who, I think in good faith really engaged with the process in the hopes that their concerns were heard. But they were clearly not," said Andrew Berman, the executive director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation.

NYU President John Sexton said in a statement that the school was "very pleased" about the Council's vote.

He said the plan would create construction jobs and generate economic activity through increased research capacity for the university.

“This plan benefits not only NYU’s students and faculty," he said in the statement. "In very real and tangible ways, it benefits New York City."

There was little surprise to the approval by the Council, which had been expected since an influential committee weighed had given it the go-ahead last Tuesday.

The 20-year construction plan is expected to begin in 2014.