

Why Zoning Reform IS Important

by Joshua Trauner

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Though not totally dead yet, City Planning Commissioner Joe Rose's attempt to make much-needed reforms to New York City's 1961 Zoning Resolution are likely to fail. Last month, I tried to explain the political reasons why this was so. Now, I would like to explain why this is a shame - why we need these reforms.

The 1961 overhaul was based on misguided principles.

As William J. Stern explains in a recent article in [City Journal](#) : "At a time when New York manufacturing employment (much of it low-paying) was already beginning its long decline, [planners] zoned whole sections of the city for manufacturing. Thinking that the city's population was growing too quickly, they forbade residential development in industrial and commercial parts of the city, so that great swathes of the five boroughs, including much of the precious waterfront, is off-limits to would-be builders of apartments or of offices for twenty-first-century businesses."

This is still one of the major reasons waterfront development stagnates. But Stern continues: "And they wanted the city to embody the vision of the then-celebrated Swiss architect Le Corbusier, who favored giant, boxy towers isolated in big, open plazas, so they allowed builders to make their edifices taller, and so boost rental footage, if they set them back from the sidewalk and surrounded them with open space."

Le Corbusier's influence was felt across America in planning in the 1950's and 1960. Most planners decided his "tower in the park" vision was the answer for development, and blindly guided their planning in that direction. It wasn't until most of these buildings were completed that people (starting with Jane Jacobs) realized how awful this type of development was. The buildings were of an inhuman scale, inaccessible in both an aesthetic and an actual physical sense.

The 1961 Overhaul made Zoning too complex.

As Joe Rose said in his [speech](#) upon announcing the reforms: "many of the problems we confront in zoning today derive from tentative and haphazard attempts to correct some of the structural mistakes that were made in 1961. Our present regulatory morass is the result of hundreds of amendments that nibble at the flaws of the original document."

Rose is not the only one who feels this way, Norman Marcus has compared the 900-page

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Resolution to detritus on the bottom of a whale. A cottage industry of New York City zoning lawyer exists with the sole specialty of interpreting the code for developers. That is not, nor was it ever meant to be, the way zoning should function.

Commissioner Rose sums up these two issues: "Our current predicament is that our zoning resolution has a discredited underlying vision, tempered by a series of quick fixes of varying effectiveness, for a city that was mostly built under a completely different set of regulations. No wonder we're confused!"

So, it's pretty much agreed that there's a lot wrong with our current zoning resolution, but pointing to what's wrong is the easy part. The current status of reform shows that it is far from agreed if changes should be made, what those changes should be, and if those changes will ever happen.

By next month we'll know more, if the reforms are dead or alive. If they're dead, the window is closed. If they're alive, then for how much longer?

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