

# Embracing Growth, Preserving Neighborhoods

by Richard Barth

Monday, February 09, 2004 12:00 AM

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New York City is undergoing a building boom, with more than 21,000 housing construction permits issued last year, the highest since 1973. As a result, some neighborhoods are being overwhelmed by development. Many quiet, tree-lined communities are struggling with traffic, a lack of parking, and housing that is vastly out-of-character for areas that are used to single-family homes and big lawns.

New Yorkers in neighborhoods fiercely protect their communities, and with good reason. The problems of congestion affect New York City's long-term prospects for business and job growth.

However, halting development altogether is not the answer. Our need to house a growing population is too great.

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Instead, we at the Bloomberg administration are working with local elected officials, community representatives and builders to address real problems in these communities, while still allowing housing development of an appropriate density, type and scale. **OVERDEVELOPMENT AND SOLUTIONS**

Many neighborhoods are beyond the reach of subway and bus lines, and so many households often have two or more cars.

Some new developments in these neighborhoods do not have enough off-street parking. A moderate-sized lot that once would have been the site of three single-family homes, might these days be developed with as many as 12 dwellings generating up to 24 cars. Even with driveways, garages and curbside space, many blocks cannot accommodate so many additional automobiles.

These larger dwellings are possible because of zoning rules that go back four decades, which enable new housing to be larger than its neighbors. The very qualities that make these neighborhoods attractive and desirable are being compromised by new multi-family development. In parts of Staten Island, for example, homes once had big back yards; today they often are developed as multiple buildings with minimal front, side or rear yards.

Last fall, Mayor Michael Bloomberg's Staten Island Growth Management Task Force developed ways to revamp the zoning regulations for the borough that, when implemented later this year, will result in better housing and a better neighborhood fit.

Under the plan, parking requirements would be increased from the current one space per dwelling to two spaces for a single-family house, and three spaces for a two-family home. This will require somewhat wider lots and reduce the number of units on many lots.

New rules for developments on private roads and interior lots would be similar to those for lots that face public streets throughout the city, ensuring that new construction would enhance, not detract, from neighboring homes. There will no longer be any new housing without front and rear yards, or with stoops descending directly into the street. **BALANCING HOUSING GROWTH**

The Department of City Planning has an ambitious, two-pronged program that seeks to create new opportunities for housing throughout the city, and to put in place new zoning that responds to local needs and conditions.

In the Bronx, for example, mixed-use zoning has already been adopted to spur housing development in Morrisania, even as special preservation rules were enacted for historic City Island.

Last year, we enacted the first comprehensive revisions to Harlem's zoning in more than 40 years. New zoning for 100 blocks of the community will preserve the row house character of its side streets while greatly increasing housing density on the avenues, which are well served by mass transit.

In Brooklyn, Fourth Avenue in Park Slope will embrace new 12-story residential buildings, while new development on brownstone-lined historic blocks will need to match the existing building heights and footprints.

In Queens, zoning changes will ensure that new development reflects the low-density character of such neighborhoods as Forest Hills, Rego Park and Holliswood, whereas new opportunities for growth will now be directed to Northern Boulevard and North Corona's other broad thoroughfares.

And, in keeping with the mayor's ambitious strategy to create 65,000 new units of housing over five years, thousands of apartments will be built along Brooklyn's East River waterfront, the west side of Manhattan and other neighborhoods throughout the city that are well served by transportation.

Zoning for other areas will also benefit from a fresh look.

In the Bronx, city planning studies are underway in Riverdale and Morris Park. In Brooklyn, we will be updating the zoning for Bay Ridge, Bensonhurst, and Bedford-Stuyvesant. And in Queens, we are studying Bellerose, Kew Gardens/Richmond Hill, Bayside, and East Flushing.

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Lessons learned on Staten Island and in the zoning study of Throgs Neck in the Bronx will be applied elsewhere, if appropriate.

We will insist on tree planting on sidewalks and landscaping that camouflages parking to enhance the look and lifestyle of these neighborhoods. We will distinguish between areas that are far from the city's mass transit system and others that are better served. Our lower density neighborhoods deserve the same level of attention as the brownstone blocks on the Upper East Side, which were rezoned to protect their special character in the mid-1980s.

If we are to continue to accommodate a growing population and protect our precious neighborhood assets, we must preserve the very qualities that make these neighborhoods special without stopping housing construction.

We must continue to pursue new housing opportunities in the right locations and at the right scale. By doing so, we can increase the supply of housing for everyone and preserve one of the special attributes of New York City, the diversity of housing and neighborhood choices. Here in New York, we can choose from center-city high rises; converted warehouses in mixed use areas; the "suburbs" of garden apartments and one- and two-family homes.

With creative and responsible planning, we can balance neighborhood preservation and the need to create housing for New Yorkers, and we will.

*Richard Barth is executive director of the Department of City Planning.*