

Rezoning Proposals Squeeze Out Affordable Housing From Both Ends

by {ga=tangotti}

Thursday, October 07, 2004 12:00 AM

Changes to the city's zoning code are now helping to put affordable housing in a double vise. On the one hand, new zoning is keeping affordable housing out of well-to-do homeowner neighborhoods that have plenty of space for new housing. On the other hand, new zoning is pushing affordable rental housing out of neighborhoods where it already exists. Soon there will be no place to live in New York City for anyone making less than \$100,000 a year. The city will be a wealthy enclave, like a medieval fortress protected from incursions by those who live outside the walls. Is this the vision behind the zoning policies of our billionaire mayor, or is it just the work of the city's planners? No matter who is responsible, we should all take a look at what's happening if we want to stick around.

Zoning to Preserve Neighborhoods

Jamaica Hill is a quiet neighborhood of one- and two-family homes in Queens. The homeowners want to keep it that way. They are afraid that speculators will see their rising property values, move into the neighborhood, buy up homes and convert them to apartments. Loose zoning regulations have produced just this scenario in many Queens neighborhoods.

So the Department of City Planning came to the rescue. In their [Jamaica Hill proposal](#), the city's planners warn that without a zoning change "existing single family homes can be replaced with attached, multifamily structures that would be out of context." So they propose to tighten up those loose zoning rules, meaning the speculators will have to go somewhere else.

Jamaica Hills is the latest in a string of lower density rezonings in the outer boroughs to protect neighborhoods from unwanted development. "Contextual" zoning rules aim to ensure that the size and scale of new development is consistent with the existing neighborhood. To the homeowners it makes a lot of sense.

The Department of City Planning is currently rezoning selected homeowner neighborhoods all over the outer boroughs to preserve what they call the "neighborhood character." For example, the city's planners propose to [strengthen the Special Natural Area District](#), which applies to portions of Staten Island, Riverdale in the Bronx, and a piece of northeast Queens. In North Riverdale, the planners proposed to rezone a homeowner neighborhood to help preserve it, and Bronx Community Board 8 unanimously concurred; the rezoning is expected to pass the land use review process shortly. Because they reduce the density of potential new development, these changes are called "downzoning." Conversely, zoning to increase density is called "upzoning."

The Neighborhoods Not Preserved

The agency is not so quick when it comes to preserving neighborhoods with renters, industry, and lower-income people. Preservation seems to be a privilege reserved for exclusive upper-income neighborhoods of homeowners. If you look at the ethnic makeup of the privileged neighborhoods it should not be surprising that most, though not all, are lily white.

The planning agency's double standard on preservation also applies to community plans. The city's planners are moving quickly to implement a community plan done by upscale homeowner neighborhoods in Queens, Riverdale and Staten Island, while at the same time they are overturning the community plan of an older working class neighborhood in Brooklyn.

The neighborhoods of Greenpoint and Williamsburg in Brooklyn have seen their plans turned upside down by the Department of City Planning. These two adjacent neighborhoods completed plans for revitalization of their East River waterfront land that were approved by the City Planning Commission and City Council only a few years ago. The plans called for a mixture of residential and small industrial uses on the waterfront at a scale consistent with the existing neighborhood of two-four story row houses. Both plans intended to make it difficult for noxious industrial uses like waste transfer stations and power plants to locate on the waterfront but wanted to keep non-polluting small-scale industries that provide jobs for many local residents.

Just like the folks in Jamaica Hills, the community planners in Brooklyn wanted to preserve the "neighborhood character." They also wanted to open up opportunities for new affordable housing that wouldn't jack up property values so much that current residents would be forced to move.

Instead of following the plan that the city approved, the Department of City Planning has now proposed [a massive upzoning of the waterfront](#), going from the medium density R6 to a high density R8. In addition, they want to allow new residential development in upland zones that now permit only industry. The inevitable effect of this in a neighborhood now undergoing severe gentrification will be to chase out existing industries and make the neighborhood another monolithic upscale bedroom community. The rezoning began the official land use review procedure on October 4 and is now under consideration by Brooklyn's Community Board One.

When you put these two rezoning strategies together, new affordable housing will be banned

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both from low-density homeowner neighborhoods and from more centrally-located neighborhoods. So where will the “affordable” housing promised in the mayor’s housing plan be built? It will have to be tucked away in the corners of the giant real estate schemes for Midtown West, lower Manhattan, downtown Brooklyn, and Queens West, so small they will be unnoticeable

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