Chapter 19: Neighborhood Character

A. INTRODUCTION

This chapter considers the effects of the proposed project on neighborhood character. According to the 2012 *City Environmental Quality Review (CEQR) Technical Manual*, neighborhood character is an amalgam of various elements that give neighborhoods their distinct "personality." These elements may include a neighborhood's land use, socioeconomic conditions, open space, historic and cultural resources, urban design and visual resources, shadows, transportation, and noise. Not all of these elements affect neighborhood character in all cases; a neighborhood usually draws its distinctive character from a few defining elements. According to the *CEQR Technical Manual,* neighborhood character impacts are rare and it would be under unusual circumstances that, in the absence of an impact in any of the relevant technical areas, a combination of moderate effects to the neighborhood would result in an impact to neighborhood character. Moreover, a significant impact identified in one of the technical areas that contribute to a neighborhood's character is not automatically equivalent to a significant impact on neighborhood character.

As described in greater detail in Chapter 1, "Project Description," the proposed project would introduce new land uses and buildings on the project site compared with the future without the proposed project, in which the project site would remain occupied by low-rise industrial buildings and largely underutilized sites. This analysis considers the effects of the proposed project on the neighborhood character of the study area and relies on the analyses of the components of neighborhood character (i.e., land use, socioeconomic conditions, open space, historic and cultural resources, urban design and visual resources, shadows, transportation, and noise) as analyzed elsewhere in this Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

PRINCIPAL CONCLUSIONS

While the proposed project would result in substantial changes to the project site, it would not have significant adverse impacts on the neighborhood character of the area. The proposed project's impacts would not individually nor cumulatively result in significant adverse impacts on neighborhood character. The proposed project would further improve the neighborhood character of the area by providing publicly accessibly open space, including landscaped, pedestrian connections to a waterfront esplanade. The new open space would provide recreational areas and would visually enhance the experience of walking around the project site. These pedestrian areas and pathways would not only improve access to the waterfront and circulation on the project site, but would also provide a cohesive transition and connection between the project site and surrounding open space resources, including Hallet's Cove Playground to the south and Whitey Ford Field to the north. Rather, the proposed project would improve the neighborhood character of the area by transforming a largely underused waterfront area into a new, enlivened mixed-use development.

Based on the methodology of the *CEQR Technical Manual*, a preliminary assessment of the proposed project's effects on neighborhood character concluded that the proposed project would not result in significant adverse impacts to neighborhood character and that a detailed analysis is not warranted.

B. METHODOLOGY

The *CEQR Technical Manual* states that an assessment of neighborhood character is needed when a proposed project has the potential to result in significant adverse impacts in any of the following technical areas: land use, zoning, and public policy; socioeconomic conditions; open space; historic and cultural resources; urban design and visual resources; shadows; transportation; or noise. An assessment may also be appropriate if the project would result in a combination of moderate effects to several elements that cumulatively may affect neighborhood character. According to the *CEQR Technical Manual*, a "moderate" effect is generally defined as an effect considered reasonably close to the significant adverse impact threshold for a particular technical analysis area.

As described in the relevant chapters of this EIS, the proposed project would not result in significant adverse impacts in the areas of land use, zoning, and public policy; socioeconomic conditions; historic and cultural resources; urban design and visual resources; shadows; or noise. However, the proposed project would result in significant adverse impacts in the areas of open space and transportation. Therefore, based on the methodology of the *CEQR Technical Manual*, a preliminary assessment of the proposed projects' effects on neighborhood character was conducted to determine the need for a detailed analysis. This preliminary assessment describes the defining features of the neighborhood and then assesses the potential for the proposed project to affect these defining features, either by having a significant adverse impact on a defining feature or through a combination of moderate effects. As recommended in the *CEQR Technical Manual*, the study area for the neighborhood character analysis is consistent with the study areas in the relevant technical areas assessed under CEQR that contribute to the defining elements of the neighborhood.

C. PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

DEFINING FEATURES

The neighborhood character of the project site and surrounding area is defined by its physical setting on the Halletts Point peninsula along the East River, as well as its land uses and urban design.

Land use is a defining feature of neighborhood character of the project site and land use study area. Similar to many neighborhoods in New York, the area is generally densely developed and contains a mix of residential, commercial, community facility, and open space uses. The area is also developed with a wide variety of housing types, including prewar mid-rise apartment buildings, a mid-20th-century "tower-in-the-park" development, two- and three-story rowhouses and semi-detached buildings, and detached one- and two-family homes mixed with a few newer, higher-density towers with commercial uses on the ground floor. The project site has a substantial affordable housing stock, including the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA)-owned Astoria Houses Campus. Market-rate residential units are also prevalent in the study area, consistent with a recent trend in the study area toward the transformation of former industrial areas to higher-density residential and commercial uses.

Industrial, light manufacturing, and storage uses are common on the project site and in the study area. Low-rise industrial development is generally located along the waterfront on the Halletts Point peninsula, and is found upland between 26th and 27th Avenues, along Astoria Boulevard in the eastern portion of the study area, and along Vernon Boulevard in the southern portion of the study area. Residential uses are mixed with the industrial uses on the upland portion of the peninsula and extend farther outward into the remainder of the study area, with large concentrations located north of 27th Avenue and south of 30th Avenue. Light-manufacturing uses in this area include predominantly construction and building suppliers, as well as additional warehousing and industrial buildings and bus/vehicle storage facilities. Vacant, former industrial sites are located along 26th Avenue between 4th and 9th Streets.

Commercial and retail uses are less prominent in the study area, but a number of the residential buildings along 14th Street have ground-floor retail or commercial uses. Some commercial uses are also located along Astoria Boulevard. In addition, the study area includes community facilities, particularly north of Astoria Boulevard. The community facilities include a public school, outpatient medical facilities, and cultural institutions.

Urban design is also a defining feature of the neighborhood character of the project site and urban design study area. The Eastern and WF Parcels are characterized by low-rise industrial buildings and open storage areas, with no public access to the waterfront. The NYCHA Parcel is characterized by mid-rise, mid-20th century buildings separated by large open areas interspersed with mature trees. While the Eastern and WF Parcels and portion of the study area west of 9th Street and north of 27th Avenue is characterized by low-rise, industrial buildings and a lack of street trees, the portion of the study area east of 9th Street and north of Astoria Boulevard is characterized by low-rise residential and community facility buildings and pedestrian-friendly streets. The portion of the study area south of Astoria Boulevard is generally a mix of low-rise residential and light-manufacturing buildings, with some newer, high-rise residential buildings.

There are no visual resources on the project site; however, prominent views of the East River, Manhattan waterfront, and Roosevelt Island are possible from the western foot of 27th Avenue. Views south of Roosevelt Island, the Queens waterfront, and the Queensborough Bridge are possible from the esplanade along the southern portion of the NYCHA Parcel. Views northwest of the Manhattan waterfront, Mill Rock Park, Wards Island Bridge, and Wards Island are possible from the western foot of 28th Avenue. Views of the East River and Manhattan waterfront are also possible from the urban design study area, particularly along the portions of 27th and 28th Avenues west of 9th Street and Vernon Boulevard. There are no archaeological or architectural resources on the project site or in the historic and cultural resources study area.

As noted above, the recent trend in the surrounding area of transforming former industrial areas to higher-density residential and commercial uses has introduced some new residents and businesses to the area. However, light-manufacturing uses and industrial buildings still dominate the project site and study area north of 27th Avenue and west of 9th Street. In general, the area has limited neighborhood retail services available to support the existing local population.

Although open space is not a defining element of the surrounding area's neighborhood character, the area is underserved by total and active open space. However, there are three notable open spaces within the project site and open space study area. These are: Whitey Ford Field, Hallet's Cove Playground, and Socrates Sculpture Park. These open spaces provide passive and active recreational opportunities, as well as panoramic views of the East River and its islands, and the Manhattan and Queens waterfronts.

The character of the area, like many neighborhoods in New York City, is in part defined by a wide range of travel modes, with moderate foot traffic on most of the area's sidewalks and crosswalks, a mix of auto/taxi/service traffic on the streets, and bus services. There are no subway stations in the immediate area, and the nearest stop on the N and Q lines is at Astoria Boulevard and 31st Street. The foot traffic patterns and timing for pedestrian activity associated with residents, workers, and visitors is characteristic of the mix of manufacturing, light industrial, and low-density residential uses in the area. The street system consists primarily of one-way streets, often fairly narrow and carrying one or two lanes of moving traffic. There are a few two-way higher capacity roadways, most notably Vernon and Astoria Boulevards and 27th Avenue. Traffic levels are generally moderate with some moderately congested intersections along Astoria Boulevard during peak travel times.

Traffic is the dominant noise source within the study area. Noise levels are moderate to relatively high and reflect the level of activity present on the adjacent roadways. Of all of the sites where it was measured, noise was highest along 2nd Street between 26th and 27th Avenues. Noise levels at the two receptor sites within the NYCHA Astoria Houses Campus were quieter than those along adjacent streets.

Overall, the study area is characterized by a diverse set of elements, including its mix of residential, light manufacturing, community facility, open space, and some commercial uses. The neighborhood contains a wide variety of residential uses, including apartment buildings, two- and three-story semi-detached and detached homes, and a few newer, higher-density residential towers. As discussed above, a recent trend in the study area has been the transformation of former industrial areas to higher-density residential and commercial uses. Despite the influx of new residents and uses, the neighborhood continues to include a substantial amount of light-industrial uses. No one defining feature would be considered critical to the character of the neighborhood. Rather, the various localized features pertaining to land use and urban design tend to characterize the overall neighborhood character of the project site and study area.

POTENTIAL TO AFFECT THE DEFINING FEATURES OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD

As described in Chapter 1, "Project Description," the proposed project would facilitate the development of Buildings 1 through 7 by the Applicant and would allow NYCHA to dispose of the site for Building 8 for development pursuant to a future request for proposals (RFP). The proposed project would result in new mid- to high-rise buildings with residential and retail uses (including a supermarket) as well as private garage and public surface parking spaces, and approximately 2.35 acres of publicly accessible open space, including a waterfront esplanade along the East River and upland connections to 1st Street. The proposed project would also include improvements to stormwater and sanitary sewer infrastructure to support the new development. In addition, the proposed project would include a number of street improvements, including a new connecting street segment between existing mapped portions of Astoria Boulevard on the NYCHA Parcel to improve circulation in the area and provide a better connection with the surrounding community.

The proposed project would rezone a portion of the Astoria Houses Campus to include a commercial overlay over the existing residential zoning district along Astoria Boulevard and 27th Avenue to facilitate the development of retail in Buildings 6 and 7 along 27th Avenue. The portion of the NYCHA Rezoning Area along Astoria Boulevard would include the development of retail in Building 8.

As noted above, the proposed project would not have significant adverse impacts on the neighborhood character-defining features of land use and urban design. However, the proposed project would have significant adverse open space and transportation impacts. Although these are not defining features of the neighborhood character of the area, each neighborhood character-related technical area is discussed in the analysis below to determine whether there could be a combination of moderate effects on the neighborhood character of the study area as a result of the proposed project.

The proposed project would result in an increase in residential and retail development, as well as new open space uses. The introduction of new residential and retail uses as a result of the proposed rezoning of the Eastern and WF Parcels and the proposed commercial overlay on the NYCHA Parcel along Astoria Boulevard and 27th Avenue would be compatible with existing land uses in the land use study area. These new uses would also facilitate the development of a mixed-use neighborhood whose retail would serve not only project-generated residents, but also existing residents in the area. The proposed new housing would also support the city's plans to provide additional capacity for residential development, especially affordable housing. In addition, the proposed 2.35 acres of publicly accessible open space, including a waterfront esplanade and upland connections to 1st Street, would be compatible with land uses in the land use study area and serve to activate the waterfront. The waterfront esplanade would include landscaping and seating along the waterfront, as well as a public plaza at 27th Avenue. The esplanade would also be designed to provide a cohesive transition between the project site and Whitey Ford Field to the north and the Hallet's Cove Playground to the south, thereby creating a continuous publicly accessible open space along approximately three-fourths of the waterfront of the Halletts Point peninsula.

As noted above, the urban design of the project site is characterized by predominantly low- to mid-rise industrial and residential buildings, as well as open storage areas and waterfront access possible only from the NYCHA Parcel. Similarly, the urban design study area is characterized by low-rise residential, community facility, commercial, and light-manufacturing buildings, with a few newer, high-rise buildings. Although the pedestrian experience of the project site would change considerably as a result of the proposed project, this change would not have a significant adverse impact on urban design in that it would not alter the arrangement, appearance, or functionality of the project site such that the alteration would negatively affect a pedestrian's experience of the area. Rather, instead of a largely vacant and underutilized stretch of industrial and manufacturing buildings along 1st Street and the west end of 26th Avenue, the pedestrian experience of the area would include new buildings with active ground-floor uses, including retail. The proposed buildings on the NYCHA Parcel would also enliven the street with active ground-floor retail uses. The new waterfront esplanade and new publicly accessible open spaces along the demapped portions of 26th and 27th Avenues and in between the proposed buildings on the WF Parcel along 1st Street would also provide recreational areas and would visually enhance the experience of walking around the project site. Furthermore, while the pedestrian's visual appearance of the project site would change considerably from within the urban design study area, the proposed project would not obstruct views to visual resources in the study area, such as the East River and Manhattan skyline, because the location of the proposed buildings is consistent with the existing street grid. Additionally, the proposed publicly accessible waterfront esplanade would provide new panoramic views of the Manhattan skyline and East River waterfront and islands, which would be an improvement over views of the primarily vacant buildings and parking lots in the future without the proposed project.

As described in Chapter 3, "Socioeconomic Conditions," although the proposed project would introduce a substantial new residential population to the area, there would be no significant adverse impacts to socioeconomic conditions in the socioeconomic study area. The proposed project would not directly displace any residents, nor would it result in significant adverse impacts related to indirect residential displacement. The proposed project would introduce new affordable housing units, which would help ensure housing opportunities for lower income households in the study area, and would help to maintain a more diverse demographic composition within the study area. The proposed project also would not result in significant adverse impacts due to direct and indirect business displacement. The socioeconomic study area is already experiencing a trend toward increased residential development, adding to the demand for neighborhood retail. Therefore, the proposed project's retail would serve existing residents, and would accommodate future consumer demand introduced by residents of planned developments and the proposed project.

The proposed project would result in significant adverse impacts to the total and active open space ratios in the open space study area due to the provision of new housing. However, as with many neighborhoods in the city, the study area is already underserved by total and active open space. The proposed project would create approximately 2.35 acres of publicly accessible open space including a waterfront esplanade and upland connections to 1st Street. Furthermore, by adding a new, high-quality public waterfront open space with on-site active open space, the proposed project would result in an improvement to the area's open space condition that is not clearly reflected in the quantitative analysis. The proposed open space would provide access to the Halletts Point waterfront and would connect with other waterfront open spaces. The proposed project's waterfront open space would also represent a major new open space resource for the neighborhood, and would serve the existing community as well as residents generated by the proposed project. As discussed in detail in Chapter 22, "Mitigation," potential mitigation measures include potential improvements to open spaces nearby the project site including, potentially, Hallet's Cove Playground and Hallet's Cove Esplanade. Mitigation measures will be explored by the Applicant in consultation with the lead agency, DCP, and DPR between the DEIS and FEIS. Therefore, although the proposed project would result in a significant adverse open space impact, the proposed project would also improve waterfront open space access in the study area and mitigation measures have been proposed to mitigate the open space impact. Thus, the proposed project's open space impact would not result in any significant adverse impacts to neighborhood character.

The proposed project would result in new shadows on several nearby open spaces, including the Hallet's Cove Esplanade, Hallet's Cove Playground, Whitey Ford Field, and the Astoria Houses Campus open spaces, as well as on the East River, an important natural feature. However, vegetation in all areas affected by project shadow would continue to receive a minimum of four hours of direct sunlight throughout the growing season. Additionally, for users of these open spaces, despite the new incremental shadows, alternative sunlit open spaces would be available for use nearby during the affected times, particularly along the waterfront and in the Astoria Houses Campus. Therefore, there would be only a moderate effect on shadows in the shadow study area as a result of the proposed project.

As discussed in Chapter 15, "Transportation," the proposed project would not result in significant adverse pedestrian impacts. Although, as described in Chapter 22, "Mitigation," implementation of the recommended traffic mitigation measures would result in a significant adverse pedestrian impact at the north crosswalk at 27th Avenue and 2nd Street during the PM peak period. Restriping the width of this crosswalk would be required to fully mitigate the

projected significant adverse crosswalk impact. The proposed project would, however, result in significant adverse traffic impacts at a number of locations in the traffic study area as well as significant adverse bus line haul impacts on the Q18, Q102, and Q103 bus routes during both the AM and PM peak periods. As described in Chapter 22, "Mitigation," most of the traffic and bus line haul impacts could be fully mitigated, although some unmitigated traffic impacts would remain. Of the intersections that could not be fully mitigated, most impacted traffic movements currently operate and would continue to operate at congested levels in the future without the proposed project such that the proposed project's traffic impacts would not be expected to result in substantial changes to neighborhood character. Moreover, the study area's traffic condition is not a defining feature of the neighborhood character of the area. Therefore, the proposed project would not have a significant adverse impact on the character of the neighborhood due to significant adverse traffic and bus line haul impacts.

While noise levels in the noise study area would increase in the future with the proposed project as a result of increased traffic, the magnitude of the increases would not constitute a significant adverse noise impact requiring mitigation. Therefore, there would be no significant adverse impacts to neighborhood character as a result of noise. The proposed project's significant adverse construction noise impacts on the study area's publicly accessible open spaces would also not be expected to result in any individual or cumulative impacts on neighborhood character, since these impacts would be temporary and noise levels in many parks and open space areas throughout the city experience comparable and sometimes higher noise levels.

As described above, the proposed project would result in significant adverse impacts to three technical areas that are not considered character defining features of the neighborhood: open space, transportation, and noise levels in existing open spaces (due to construction activities). These impacts would not individually or cumulatively result in significant adverse neighborhood character impacts. The proposed project's open space impact would not have the potential to cumulatively affect open space in such a way that would result in significant adverse neighborhood character impacts. As noted above, the construction noise impacts would be temporary and comparable to noise levels experienced in many open space areas throughout the city. With respect to the potential open space impact, mitigation measures will be explored between the DEIS and FEIS, and the proposed project would also improve waterfront open space access in the study area. Therefore, the potential impacts to open space would not have the potential to cumulatively result in significant adverse neighborhood character impacts.

The proposed project would not result in significant adverse impacts to the two technical areas that are character-defining features of the neighborhood: land use and urban design. Additionally, moderate effects in other technical areas not considered defining features of neighborhood character, such as socioeconomic conditions, noise, and shadows, also would not result in any overall significant adverse impacts on neighborhood character. Overall, the proposed project would transform a largely underused waterfront area into a new, enlivened mixed-use development while providing much needed neighborhood retail services and new, publicly accessible open space, including a waterfront esplanade with upland connections and a connection to Hallet's Cove Playground south of the site and Whitey Ford Field north of the site. The proposed open space is intended to provide benefits for the Astoria community, the Borough of Queens, and the city as a whole. The new connecting street segment between existing mapped portions of Astoria Boulevard on the NYCHA Parcel is intended to improve circulation in the area and provide a better connection with the surrounding community. The development of Building 8, including the proposed ground-floor retail, in conjunction with the ground-floor

retail proposed for Buildings 1 through 7, would also create more active street life along 27th Avenue and Astoria Boulevard.

Overall the proposed project would have a positive effect on the neighborhood character of the project site and study area by creating a new, vibrant mixed-use development, enlivening the streetscape along Astoria Boulevard and 27th Avenue, and transforming the waterfront into a dynamic, publicly accessible open space. ✷