Chapter 16: Neighborhood Character

A. INTRODUCTION

This chapter considers the effects of the proposed actions on neighborhood character. Neighborhood character is an amalgam of various elements that give a neighborhood its distinct "personality." These elements may include a neighborhood's land use, urban design, visual resources, historic resources, socioeconomics, traffic, 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 occur under unusual circumstances in which, 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 Chapter 1, "Project Description," the proposed actions would facilitate the development of up to approximately 1.2 million gross square feet (gsf) of residential and other uses on the lots owned by the applicant (the project site). For analysis purposes, it is also assumed that the proposed actions would result in the redevelopment of an additional site ("development site 2," Block 1104 Lots 25 and 29), at the corner of West 56th Street and Eleventh Avenue which is not controlled by the applicant, with a new hotel.

As detailed in previous chapters, the proposed actions would result in significant adverse impacts in only one of the technical areas that contribute to neighborhood character—transportation. However, as described in Chapter 11, "Transportation," and Chapter 19, Mitigation," these potential impacts could all be mitigated. With implementation of the proposed mitigation measures, there would be no significant adverse impacts and no noticeable change to neighborhood character as it relates to transportation conditions.

For each of the key technical areas related to neighborhood character, this chapter describes existing conditions, future conditions without the proposed actions, and conditions with the proposed actions. In addition, in accordance with the guidance of the *CEQR Technical Manual*, this analysis considers the potential for the proposed actions to affect neighborhood character through a combination of moderate effects in relevant technical areas.

PRINCIPAL CONCLUSIONS

Based on the methodology of the *CEQR Technical Manual*, a preliminary assessment of the proposed actions' effects on neighborhood character was conducted to determine the need for a detailed analysis. The preliminary assessment concluded that the proposed actions would not result in any significant adverse impacts to neighborhood character and that a detailed analysis was not necessary. While the proposed actions would result in moderate effects in certain technical areas related to neighborhood character, such as shadows and open space, even taken

together these moderate effects would not result in a cumulative significant adverse impact to the area's neighborhood character. Overall, the new residential, retail, hotel and other uses that are expected to result from the proposed actions would revitalize the proposed rezoning area, which is underutilized and will continue to be underutilized in the future without the proposed actions.

The proposed actions would continue the citywide trend toward redevelopment of former manufacturing areas—particularly those located near the waterfront—into vibrant mixed-use communities. More specifically, it would contribute toward the ongoing trend of redevelopment of this part of Manhattan's West Side, which has seen several mixed-use and residential projects built in the recent past and is expected to see additional redevelopment of underutilized sites in the near future.

The new buildings introduced through the proposed actions would be built to a comparable scale to other buildings in the surrounding area, and would conform with the existing higher-density residential development. In addition, the retail uses introduced along Eleventh Avenue and West 57th Street would contribute to the vitality of the streetscape and retail environment, and reinforce the character of 57th Street as a major mixed-use corridor running through the heart of Manhattan.

B. METHODOLOGY

According to the *CEQR Technical Manual*, an analysis of neighborhood character begins with a preliminary assessment to determine whether changes expected in other technical areas may affect an element that contributes to neighborhood character. The assessment should identify the defining features of the neighborhood, and assess whether the project has the potential to affect these defining features, either through the potential for significant adverse impacts or a combination of moderate effects. Potential effects on neighborhood character may include:

- *Land Use.* When development resulting from a proposed project would have the potential to change neighborhood character by: introducing a new, incompatible land use; conflicting with land use policy or other public plans for the area; changing land use character; or resulting in significant land use impacts.
- *Urban Design and Visual Resources.* In developed areas, urban design changes have the potential to affect neighborhood character by introducing substantially different building bulk, form, size, scale, or arrangement. Urban design changes may also affect block forms, street patterns, or street hierarchies, as well as streetscape elements such as streetwalls, landscaping, curb cuts, and loading docks. Visual resource changes have the potential to affect neighborhood character by directly changing visual features such as unique and important public view corridors and vistas, or public visual access to such features.
- *Historic Resources.* When a project would result in substantial direct changes to a historic resource or substantial changes to public views of a resource, or when a historic resources analysis identifies a significant impact in this category, there is a potential to affect neighborhood character.
- *Socioeconomic Conditions.* Changes in socioeconomic conditions have the potential to affect neighborhood character when they result in substantial direct or indirect displacement or addition of population, employment, or businesses; substantial differences in population or employment density; or if a project results in changes to a unique industry.

- *Open Space.* Changes in open spaces have the potential to affect neighborhood character when a proposed project would result in the overburdening of existing open space facilities or would exacerbate an existing deficiency in open space.
- *Shadows.* When an action would result in a substantial reduction in the usability of an open space, or in the use, enjoyment or appreciation of the sunlight-sensitive features of a historic resource as a result of increased shadow, there is a potential to affect neighborhood character.
- *Transportation*. Changes in transportation conditions can affect neighborhood character in a number of ways. For traffic to have an effect on neighborhood character, it must be a contributing element to the character of the neighborhood (either by its absence or its presence), and it must change substantially as a result of the project. Such substantial traffic changes can include: change in level of service (LOS) to C or below; change in traffic patterns; change in roadway classifications; change in vehicle mixes; substantial increases in traffic volumes on residential streets; or significant traffic impacts, as identified in that technical analysis. Regarding pedestrians, when a proposed project would result in substantially different pedestrian activity and circulation, it has the potential to affect neighborhood character.
- *Noise*. For a project to affect neighborhood character in regard to noise, it would need to result in a significant adverse noise impact and a change in acceptability category.

According to the *CEQR Technical Manual*, a proposed project can also have a combination of moderate effects to several elements that cumulatively may affect neighborhood character. Therefore, this analysis also evaluates the potential for the proposed project to affect neighborhood character through a combination of effects.

For the purposes of this analysis, it was assumed that the two alternative development options that could result from the proposed actions, RWCDS 1 and RWCDS 2, would have a similar effect on neighborhood character. Both RWCDS 1 and RWCDS 2 would introduce a new mix of uses and would be primarily residential. These residential uses, together with other uses such as retail shops, would activate a site that is currently underutilized. Similarly, the design of the building on the proposed project site would be the same in both scenarios, and would have a similar effect on the urban design and visual resource aspects of neighborhood character.

STUDY AREA

As stated in the 2012 *CEQR Technical Manual*, the study area for a preliminary analysis of neighborhood character is typically consistent with the study areas in the relevant technical areas that contribute to the defining elements of the neighborhood. Therefore, the study area for this analysis reflects those considered for the other analyses, which include areas up to 1/4-mile from the rezoning area. As such, the study area for neighborhood character extends up to 1/4-mile to include the area roughly bounded by West 62nd Street to the north, between Ninth Avenue and Tenth Avenue to the east, West 51st Street to the south, and the Hudson River to the west.

C. PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The neighborhood character of the study area is defined by a few key components, including its ongoing redevelopment as a mixed-use neighborhood, its location in a busy urban area on Manhattan's far west side, and its proximity to the Hudson River and public open spaces.

LAND USE

The neighborhood includes a wide range of land uses and building types, including mid- and high-rise residential buildings, automobile showrooms and service facilities, parking facilities, institutional uses, utilities, warehouses, office space, and film and television production studios. The area is densely developed, particularly to the north and east, and is mostly composed of new and older community facility and institutional buildings, a large utility building that occupies a full city block (the Consolidated Edison Power House), and recently built residential and mixed-use towers. Newer residential developments that contribute to defining the character of the area include the 38-story Helena condominium, located immediately to the north of the proposed rezoning area, the 32-story Mercedes House on the east side of Eleventh Avenue, 10 West End Avenue, and the ongoing Riverside South project, which stretches north beyond the study area.

OPEN SPACE

The predominant natural feature in the study area is the Hudson River, which has open space along most of the Manhattan shoreline. As discussed in Chapter 5, "Open Space," the study area's major open space is Hudson River Park. The Clinton Cove section of the park runs between Pier 94 (near West 54th Street) and Pier 97 (near West 57th Street). This area includes an esplanade with benches, lawns, shade trees, and a public boat house at the waterfront. Another large waterfront open space, Riverside Park South, is north of West 59th Street. This park was built on the site of a former railroad yard and was designed to retain its industrial flavor, with angular paths created from old concrete railroad platforms and other reused railroad artifacts such as ramps, piers, and a gantry. Dewitt Clinton Park is another major open space in the neighborhood that, along with other public and private open spaces, contributes to the character of the area.

URBAN DESIGN AND VISUAL RESOURCES

The study area provides unique public view corridors and vistas, which are a defining feature of the study area's neighborhood character. As described in Chapter 8, "Urban Design and Visual Resources," Riverside Park South, Hudson River Park, and portions of Route 9A and Riverside Boulevard provide expansive views of the Hudson River and the New Jersey Palisades. Because it is a wide street, West 57th Street also provides a view corridor looking west to the Hudson River and New Jersey beyond. This view is enhanced by the rise in elevation going eastward, particularly in the blocks between Eleventh and Ninth Avenues. Some of the narrower cross streets also provide views west to the river and New Jersey.

HISTORIC AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

While historic and architectural resources are not defining features of the study area's neighborhood character, the Consolidated Edison Power House (S/NR-eligible, NYCL-pending)

and its tall brick smokestack are visible throughout much the study area, particularly from Riverside Park South, Hudson River Park, the elevated portion of Route 9A north of the project block, and along Eleventh/West End Avenue.

TRANSPORTATION

The character of the study area, like that of many neighborhoods in New York City, is in part defined by the levels of pedestrian and vehicular activity that exist in the study area. As noted in Chapter 11, "Transportation," the neighborhood generally has low volumes of pedestrian traffic, due largely to its location on the far west side of Manhattan, with the nearest subway stations located several blocks to the east (57th Street at Seventh Avenue Station and 59th Street Columbus Circle Station). However, the neighborhood does have relatively high volumes of vehicular traffic. Traffic volumes are particularly high along the major arterial roads in the study area: Route 9A/Twelfth Avenue and Eleventh Avenue, which carry north-south traffic in both directions, and West 57th Street, which carries east-west traffic in both directions and also includes two public bus routes.

NOISE

As noted in Chapter 14, "Noise," the dominant source of noise in the study area is from traffic based on field measurements and monitoring. Measured noise levels are moderate to relatively high and reflect the level of vehicular activity on the major roadways—Route 9A/Twelfth Avenue, Eleventh Avenue, and West 57th Street.

THE FUTURE WITHOUT THE PROPOSED ACTIONS

As described in Chapter 1, "Project Description," absent the proposed actions, all existing uses in the rezoning area would remain. However, as described in Chapter 2, "Land Use, Zoning, and Public Policy," several independent projects are expected to be completed within the study area by 2017 that will contribute to the study area's neighborhood character. In particular, high-density residential development in the study area is expected to continue. Large-scale residential developments include 40 Riverside Boulevard, 625 West 57th Street, located on the block immediately to the north of the rezoning area, and Buildings 1, 2, and 5 of the Riverside Center project, located on the block bounded by West 61st Street, West End Avenue, West 58th Street, and Riverside Boulevard. These projects, as well as other projects within the study area that are expected to introduce residential uses, would add 4,617 new residential units to the area. In addition, new open space resources are expected to be introduced to the area through open space projects associated with large-scale residential developments (Riverside Park South and the Riverside Center open space area) as well as the continuing revitalization of the Hudson River waterfront initiative.

The projects expected to be developed in the future without the proposed actions would not significantly alter the study area's neighborhood character. Rather, the projects would extend the mix of land uses and building types that is a defining feature of the study area. In particular, the introduction of new high-density residential developments and additional open space resources would reinforce the land use and urban design characteristics of the study area that have undergone transformation during the area's recent period of revitalization. The resulting changes to neighborhood character in the study area that are expected to occur in the future without the proposed actions would represent a continuation of this trend.

PROBABLE IMPACTS OF THE PROPOSED ACTIONS

With the proposed actions, the applicant intends to construct a new mixed-use tower on the proposed project site. The building on the proposed project site would contain approximately 1.2 million gsf of residential and commercial uses, as well as space for a public parking garage. The building would contain ground-floor retail space with frontages planned for both West 57th Street and Eleventh Avenue. The proposed actions are also assumed to result in the development of a new, approximately 117,612 gsf hotel on the projected development site at the southeast corner of the rezoning area.

The proposed actions have the potential to affect three of the defining features of the area's neighborhood character: land use, urban design, and transportation.

LAND USE

For land use, the proposed actions would allow the redevelopment of a site that is largely underutilized. In place of the aging and outmoded buildings that now exist, the proposed actions would result in new residential, retail, and hotel uses that would complement existing uses and enliven the study area. While these developments would alter the land use composition of the rezoning area, the change would not be considered adverse. The new uses would be in keeping with the study area's land use character, which includes a mix of different uses and building types. The proposed actions would result in a continuation of the study area's recent trend towards high-density residential development, as evidenced by other residential towers that have been recently built in the study area as well as other projects—such as 625 West 57th Street and the Riverside Center buildings—that are expected to be completed by 2017. New hotel space would also contribute to the developing mixed-use character of the study area, and could serve patrons of destinations that attract tourists and business travelers, such as Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, the Theater District, and the Midtown central business district. Overall, the land use changes associated with the proposed actions would not result in any significant adverse neighborhood character impacts in the study area.

URBAN DESIGN AND VISUAL RESOURCES

In the area of urban design, the proposed actions would result in the redevelopment of sites that currently contain low-density commercial, parking, and other auto-related uses. Therefore, the visual appearance and the pedestrian experience of the rezoning area would improve considerably. However, as described in Chapter 8, "Urban Design and Visual Resources," the changes associated with the proposed actions would not result in a significant adverse urban design impact. The redevelopment that would take place with the proposed actions would be in keeping with the scale of other buildings in the study area, particularly the recently-built and planned modern high-rise buildings, and would contribute to the conversion of the Eleventh/West End Avenue corridor into a more residential boulevard. The proposed retail on Eleventh Avenue and West 57th Street would improve the pedestrian experience in the study area by providing visual interest at street level. In addition, the redevelopment of the proposed project site and the projected development site would not significantly affect the available visual resources within the study area. There would be no interruption or alteration of the expansive views of the Hudson River and New Jersey available from Riverside Park South, Hudson River Park, the elevated portions of Route 9A and Riverside Boulevard, and existing east-west street locations. The Consolidated Edison Power House and its tall brick smokestack would remain visible throughout much of the study area and from more distant locations. Therefore, the urban

design and visual resource changes resulting from the proposed actions would not result in any significant adverse neighborhood character impacts in the study area.

TRANSPORTATION

As described in Chapter 11, "Transportation," the proposed actions would result in significant adverse impacts in the area of vehicular traffic. Significant adverse traffic impacts have been identified at several approaches/lane groups, predominantly along the major arterial streets located within the study area (Route 9A/Twelfth Avenue, Eleventh Avenue, and West 57th Street). However, as described in Chapter 19, "Mitigation," these significant adverse traffic impacts could be fully mitigated using mitigation measures including signal timing changes and approach daylighting. Furthermore, as previously discussed, the neighborhood character of the study area is partly defined by existing relatively high traffic volumes, particularly along main arterial streets, therefore the increased traffic resulting from the proposed actions does not represent a significant alteration of this character-defining feature.

The proposed actions would also result in a significant adverse pedestrian impact at the south crosswalk of West 57th Street and Eleventh Avenue during peak hours. This impact could be fully mitigated by increasing the width of this crosswalk; implementation of this mitigation measure would be subject to review and approval by New York City Department of Transportation (NYCDOT). This impact is largely a reflection of the fact that there are now relatively low levels of pedestrian activity in this area, and that the proposed actions would serve to activate the pedestrian environment of the study area through the introduction of new uses on a site that is largely underutilized. While there would be more pedestrians introduced by the proposed actions, this would not constitute an adverse impact in terms of neighborhood character. In fact the proposed actions would enliven the streetscape, provide active uses in an area that would otherwise remain underutilized, and improve the study area's neighborhood character. Therefore, busier pedestrian conditions with the proposed actions would not result in a significant adverse neighborhood character impact.

The *CEQR Technical Manual* states that even if a project does not have the potential to result in a significant adverse impact to neighborhood character in a certain technical area, the project may result in a combination of moderate effects to several elements that may cumulatively affect an area's neighborhood character. A moderate effect is generally defined as an effect considered reasonably close to a significant adverse impact threshold for a particular technical area. The proposed actions would result in moderate effects on the surrounding area in several technical areas. For example, as discussed in Chapter 6, "Shadows," the proposed project would generate incremental shadows on nearby open space resources, such as Hudson River Park. Similarly, as discussed in Chapter 5, "Open Space," the proposed actions would have a moderate effect on nearby open space resources by introducing a new residential population that would seek out those resources. However, both the shadows and open space analyses concluded that these moderate effects would not overburden existing open space facilities or otherwise adversely impact their usability, therefore these effects would not result in a cumulative significant adverse impact to this element of the area's neighborhood character.

The proposed actions would not result in adverse effects that are reasonably close to significant adverse impacts in the areas of land use, zoning, and public policy; socioeconomic conditions; urban design and visual resources; historic and cultural resources; or noise. While the proposed project would result in significant adverse impacts in the area of transportation (both traffic and pedestrian), mitigation measures are available to mitigate these impacts. In any event, increases

in vehicular and pedestrian traffic would be unlikely to result in significant adverse impacts to the study area's neighborhood character. Therefore, the proposed actions would not result in a combination of moderate effects that cumulatively may affect the area's neighborhood character.

This preliminary assessment identified no potential significant adverse impacts to the study area's neighborhood character resulting from the proposed actions. Therefore a detailed neighborhood character analysis is not necessary.

Overall, the new residential, retail, hotel and other uses that are expected to result from the proposed actions would revitalize the proposed rezoning area, which is underutilized and will continue to be underutilized in the future without the proposed actions. The proposed actions would continue the citywide trend toward redevelopment of former manufacturing areas into vibrant mixed-use communities. More specifically, it would represent another element in the ongoing redevelopment of this part of Manhattan's West Side, which has seen several mixed-use and residential projects built in the recent past and is expected to see additional redevelopment of underutilized sites in the near future. In addition, the retail uses introduced along Eleventh Avenue and West 57th Street would contribute to the vitality of the streetscape and retail environment, and reinforce the character of 57th Street as a major mixed-use corridor running through the heart of Manhattan. ✷