500 Kent Avenue, City Planning Commission Public Hearing
Wednesday, May 15, 2024, 10 AM
City Planning Commission Hearing Room, Lower Concourse,
120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271

SARA AVILA, CITY PLANNING COMMISSION SECRETARY: Borough of Brooklyn Calendar numbers 9, 10, and 11. 500 Kent Avenue, CD. 2. Calendar, number 9, C230293 ZMK, calendar number 10, C230294 ZSK, calendar number 11, C230296 ZSK. Public hearing as a matter of applications for a zoning map amendment and special permits concerning 500 Kent Avenue. Notice. A public hearing is being held by the City Planning Commission in conjunction with the above ULURP actions to receive comments related to a draft environmental impact statement. This hearing is being held pursuant to the State Environmental Quality Review Act and the City Environmental Quality Review.

DAN GARODNICK, CITY PLANNING COMMISISON CHAIR: Great. Thank you very much. We have an applicant team here to present today on this item which includes Nebil Gokcebay I'm sorry if I'm doing damage your name, Raymond Levin, Jeff Reuben, Rick Parisi, and Anna Baldassare. Welcome to have you here whenever you are ready. You have 10 min, and welcome.

RAYMOND LEVIN: Very technologically impaired. good morning.

My name's Raymond Levin. I'm special counsel at Herrick Feinstein

With me today is Nebil of Marvel designs, the architects for the project, and Anna Baldassare, of MPFP, the landscape architects.

Okay. Now, how do I do this? There we go.

The applicants are seeking zoning actions, including a map change from M3-1 to M1-5 at 500 Kent Avenue in South Williamsburg.

The site is located on Wallabout Channel, with frontage on Division and Kent avenues and abuts the Brooklyn Navy to the south. The project site and the Navy Yard property from Division down to Clymer Street are currently occupied with open uses.

North of Division is the Naftali project 3, consisting of 3 buildings residential buildings. The closest to our site being 23 stories across Kent Avenue is the Roberto Clemente Ball field and park.

The proposal Development includes over 500,000 square feet of office space. over 20,000 square feet of retail space, over an acre of publicly accessible open space, over 200 below grade, parking spaces and a hundred bicycle parking spaces.

The projects aims, beyond a positive return on investment, are to redevelop the site in a manner that links the new residential development to the north, the established South Williamsburg neighborhood to the east, and the Navy Yard to the South.

The proposed project will contribute to the neighborhood and the broader community by improving the vacant lot currently used for school bus parking,

creating a public water walkway that will ultimately connect with similar public ways, both North and South, create additional public access points from Kent Avenue to the Wallabout Channel, provide space for both offices and retail businesses which can provide services to and employment opportunities for residents, and generate tax revenues for the city, including real estate sales and payroll taxes.

Nebil and Anna will now show the program in 3 dimensions.

NEBIL GOKCEBAY: Good morning, everyone. Nebil Gokcebay, Marvel Architects.

So to reiterate what's been said before the site, between Navy Yard and the residential developments to the north, and we've always kind of seen the site as a bridge and a Connector.

For that, and the change in the zoning kind of allows the waterfront esplanade to kinda be incorporated and kinda continue from their neighborhood to the north across our site and connect to the Navy Yard Master plan to the south, and we think that's kind of an important piece of what the Navy Yard wants to achieve, and what the developmental the waterfront has done.

You can see in this diagram. It's a little hard. But one of the observations kind of during the design process was about the city grids that wrap the Navy Yard and the neighborhood that this site sits in, which led us to kind of incorporate an additional pass through on the site to break up the street frontage, as well as kind of aligning the bulk of the project with one of the street grids to the south, to kind of give it some basis, and also to maintain some of the kind of view corridors that existed, specifically on division up from Bedford looking down to the water, and not kind of obscuring that with kind of a large mass.

This is the ground floor Site plan, where you can kind of see the extent of the waterfront improvements, the path through and the center of the site, the visual corridor to the south.

Creating these 3 entry points into the site which then will connect with enough tally efforts on the north and the future developments of the Navy Yard with their esplanade on the south, the northern portion of the building houses. The most of the retail in the building Southern portion has the office lobby, as well as kind of the tower portion of the project.

You know the project sits in a zone X as far as flood zone goes. So basic waterproofing measures are taken into account for the foundation systems minimizing the entry points, if there were ever an incident, and obviously, dry proofing any areas that that could or would be impacted by current or, you know, many years in the future events.

Oh. I Hit, the stop.

To the illustration just of the massing from the 2 sides of the project, the water side, and the streetscape side to coat kinda illustrate that the massing is kind of allocated along that streetscape boundary, allowing kind of large areas of open space on either side of the building's footprint.

And then here's a few illustrations of the project, one stepping back further up Bedford to kind of show the projects from a far.

You can see the vision on the right, the center access point in the image, and then the visual corridor on the on the far left.

The closer up view to kind of illustrating more kind of the path through effect where you could kind of break up a site with these access points.

Moving to the southern side of the site as you approach up Kent you have the entry to the visual corridor, as well as the loading area and the kind of office lobby on the right side of the image, and then moving forward up the street just outside the office lobby.

Kind of again, bit of a colonnade and open space as a illustrative idea. And addressing kind of the drop off and access issues that we've worked with the city and DOT to resolve.

So with that I'll hand it off to Anna to discuss the waterfront, and landscape.

Okay, Rick.

RICK PARISI: Morning Rick Parisi, landscape architect. Not Anna, Anna is behind me.

So I think everybody's already talked about the open space, you know, Ray, both Ray and Nebil covered the open space pretty clearly, and the goal here was to make a really strong visual and physical connection to the neighborhood, and while we had a visual corridor requirement, we didn't really have to make that visual corridor more of an upland connection, which is what we did.

Working with urban design, we went back and forth, and how to make this porosity clearer, right? So we do have against the Navy to adjacent to the Navy Yard. We have that really it acts like a true upland connection, even though it isn't classified as one and it is a visual corridor, has seating, you know, real, clear connection.

There is always a question whether, when the Navy Yard is developed, how that would be connected. So we have a connection to the Navy Yard setup. If that site gets developed and I think that was really important just to keep this fluid connectivity. And the center one, which is the PAA, right?

Also is doing quite a bit of gymnastics. And I think when you look at the grades here, we're going from street grades up to elevation 16, and then we're actually dropping the shore public walkways.

The small of it that we dropped down to Elevation 7. We would have liked that to be a full get down but we'd have to get down to 2. It's just too much to do in the 40 feet, but we do have a series of stepped areas and amphitheater type areas, informal raised seating areas throughout the whole open space. So you have the SPW in blue, the SPAA, which is a subarea in

pink. Then the PAA, which is PAA number one, which goes under the building as you so saw in the 3D's, and then the visual corridor on the bottom.

There's the rendered plan and a 3D. So you can see the visual corridor on the right. There comes down this, starts to drop down, it's an ADA connection downed Elevation 7, so we dropped the bulkhead down. Then we come back up and this area, here's the little seating area raised, another little raised seating area here. So it's a really kind of organic system of platforms, you know, little raised rooms, and all of them ADA connected.

And then, of course, our connection to it.

Street here, division here.

I think that's all we got in there. A couple of renderings of you can see is that stepped area and the ADA connections on the other side, and that's from the lower elevation at elevation 7.

Now there was a quite a bit of talk about this loading area here, and send my time real quick cause this was. We went over this with urban design quite a bit. We wanted a loading area to feel pedestrian, so it does have pavers on it. The loading is very infrequent. So this pedestrian plaza here, which is not a PAA, not really part.

Over the open space, technically is connected with a walkway right here, and the same paving type.

And that's it.

DAN GARODNICK: Okay, great. we will have some questions for you from commissioners. Let me just start with couple, and I think you should stay at the mic because they're for you.

On the special permit on with some of the waivers here. One of the waivers relates to the width of the walls along the shoreline normally a hundred feet here requested 3, 43.

Can you say a little bit more about the configuration of the buildings? And why that would justify here, a greater waiver than what you know, the what the norm allows. Why, we should allow for a waiver so significant as 343 feet here?

NEBIL GOKCEBAY: Okay. Hello, Commissioners Nebil again from Marvel. So as you can kind of see the do the orientation of the or rotation of the rectangle to align with the street grid.

It's the tower frontage is actually less than a hundred, but because of the orientation that it's signed placement. It kind of rotates on its access, which kind of creates that broader overlay of the I forget what the term was, but the waterfront facing facade so, and, as the you know, trying to keep the tower lower, we kind of increase some of the bulk on the lower floors.

So that's kind of why some of it spread so that we didn't kind of keep going up cause we felt 23 was kind of where it wanted to be from a total height standpoint.

Additionally, there's a kind of on the retail piece to the north. There's a small penthouse on the top there. Which can kind of be an amenity. It can tie to some of the retail spaces to make both the ground floor retail as well as the roof space an amenity for the building and the public restaurant, or, you know, whatever it may end up being but so those 2, those multiple pieces kind of even though they're disparate and kind of spread across because of their orientations to the waterfront, they kind of add up to this larger frontage.

Think if we oriented the building perpendicular to the facade. I mean to the streets gate, or to the waterfront. It would be a little bulkier to the community side.

So we think this alignment, this openness to the waterfront, and providing these extra pass through to the site benefits from this configuration.

DAN GARODNICK: Okay, thank you. And my only other question was about the connection to the Navy Yard next door. You could you say a little bit more about what? What provisions being made to maintain possible opportunities between these sites?

NEBIL GOKCEBAY: So I'll touch, and then you can add, I guess. Obviously, you know, as Rick mentioned, we're going from a very high elevation at the street to very low elevation at the waterfront, which you know parallels on the Navy Yard side of the project.

You know, during design the visual corridor is a requirement will be incorporated.

Whoever kind of gets there first would have to do it or incorporate it. So we've incorporated the Navy Yard may actually incorporate one in their plan. I haven't familiarized myself with it. So you actually may end up with a very generous space between the 2 buildings that parallel each other if they choose to do that. Beyond that, at the esplanade portion of the site it's configured with, you know, demountable elements that are intended to be able to be removed so that kind of the esplanade can continue between the 2 sites.

RAYMOND LEVIN: I also added, the Navy Yard master Plan shows a waterfront walkway along their property, so those will connect up, as will the connection to Naftali, so the continuous waterfront walkway will happen one of these days.

DAN GARODNICK: Okay, got it. It's important to maintain the possibility for that, so that's great. Okay, thank you. Let me go to Commissioner Benjamin.

GAIL BENJAMIN, CITY PLANNING COMMISSIONER: Hi, I have a couple of different questions. I've been concerned about taking M-3 land which is scarce and turning it into land that is less manufacturing, friendly.

And your proposal does several things. That concern me, one of which is that you don't show a lot of renderings which include the buildings across Kent Avenue, which are all residential at this point. Kent Avenue, with that very large bike lane is only really one lane from here all the way past Dominoes.

It used to be a really nice 4 Lane road, but now it's down to one lane with that weird parking in the middle of the street.

Given the residential across the way all the way down to the BQE. What makes this an appropriate site for a tower? A 23 story building. And why would we want to increase that FAR on the waterfront to allow that to happen?

RAYMOND LEVIN: Well, let's talk about the residential on the other side of Kent. Across from us is a park across from the Navy Yard are the Resident buildings.

The Navy Yard is proposing buildings that are of similar height to ours, from what we can tell from their master plan which the commission approved a year or 2 ago.

And Naftali is 23-24 stories. The building across the street from Naftali is an overbuilt building, because of conversion which is FAR 6 the building south of us, south of the park, I believe, is 11 stories. So it's not the Central Williamsburg that we know about a 4 story walk ups there are significant.

Larger buildings surrounding our property and will eventually surround, whereas the Navy Yard, develops their property. You can see in this illustration. So we think that it's appropriate rather than having more of a low density building.

We spend a lot of time with the architects and the landscape architects in breaking up that. So when you're on the ground, when you're walking on the street you will see lots of connections to the water. And the height of the building will not be as prominent as in renderings which are bird’s eye view.

GAIL BENJAMIN: But you're not tied to this design, because it's a rezoning

RAYMOND LEVIN: Where we ask for a whole bunch of special permits.

GAIL BENJAMIN: Parking

RAYMOND LEVIN: For waivers from the waterfront regulations as mentioned.

About the 100 foot fail, you know façade facing, so yes, that’s true. We could throw this all away and build an R-5 something.

GAIL BENJAMIN: Or community facility.

RAYMOND LEVIN: In the current, M Zone, community facilities are quite limited.

GAIL BENJAMIN: Right? But we have the City of Yes bill going through which will allow for M3-1, but also in the M1.

RAYMOND LEVIN: We'll see what happens..

DAN GARODNICK: It's gonna we'll make it happen. Make our case for so

GAIL BENJAMIN: You could have a 6.5 community facility, which could include a dorm without sleeping, with sleeping accommodations for a not for profit.

Could be a religious institution, it could be a lot of things.

And did you look at any of those uses? And what would likely be the design of those?

RAYMOND LEVIN: No, we've been focusing on this project.

The property was purchased before the pandemic.

GAIL BENJAMIN: When was it purchased?

RAYMOND LEVIN: 2019, I believe, Con. Ed put it up for auction, I think, in 2016 or 2017.

So that's what we were looking at the time. And we proceeded with that; the world has changed.

Our clients still believes that there is a market for this. There have been a number of commercial leases in Domino and Dumbo's doing pretty well. So, and you know we're several years away from the project being built.

GAIL BENJAMIN: I mean, there's so much empty office space all over. Has your client really done marketing studies of office in this location, which is, aside from the bus, which is not great.

Public access to this site is somewhat limited. I assume, that's why he wants a 200 plus car garage.

RAYMOND LEVIN: No, he wants. He wants it.

I’m not saying he wants a 200 car park garage, that’s what the environmental says we need to have in order not to have an impact.

It was not something that was part of anyone’s program. It came from the environmental study that was done. So that's how it ended up being 200. And whatever the number of spaces are something like that.

GAIL BENJAMIN: Yeah, 234

RAYMOND LEVIN: In terms of marketing studies, there haven't been any marketing studies since we're several years out and the market recently.

It's been very volatile, I guess, or maybe not so volatile, and so we haven't done that. But we have, we do know that there are a lot from the people who are part of the project team who are very attuned to what's going on in the Williamsburg community. That there are a lot of, you know, people working out of their living rooms and studies who are developing things, who would want office space, We're looking at educational, medical, other kinds of uses that seem to be expanding.

And for better or worse I think congestion pricing will help Brooklyn to some extent.

Having people you know, who don't want to travel into Manhattan.

Given the pricing that will cause them.

Good, for the environment in Manhattan, and maybe good for the office market in Brooklyn, and we have all those new residents who are gonna occupy the Naftali Buildings.

GAIL BENJAMIN: I mean we approved the project for the Naftalie site when I was still…

RAYMOND LEVIN: Naftali is under the last time I walked by, when we went to, I went to the opening of the Refinery Building at Domino that something is under construction. So it is under construction. Whether do we know how far, how far along, what it's gonna be? I'm sorry.

GAIL BENJAMIN: Do we know what it's going to be constructing?

RAYMOND LEVIN: A residential building. Yes, yes.

So for those reasons our client believes that there will be a market that he can tap into when this building is completed.

And also, I think also the Navy, I mean the Navy Yard, to some extent will help us. There’s growth and having more industrial buildings, more industrial workers, more industrial companies, they do have office needs.

They will also find a home in this building. So it's situated at a good location in terms of workforce, in terms of nearby residents, in terms of growing businesses that would be looking for space.

So they are, I don't know what the term is, optimistic or…

GAIL BENJAMIN: Why a zone that would allow this much development? Why not an M1-3, as opposed to an M1-5?

RAYMOND LEVIN: Because this is bigger.

GAIL BENJAMIN: I mean I know it's bigger.

The question, of course, is, do we want that much bulk and that much height on the waterfront? I heard your explanation, and I respect it, but I still have concerns. Sorry.

RAYMOND LEVIN: May disagree, the density that's

GAIL BENJAMIN: And last, but not least, given that this is a waterfront site, and it's subject to all of those 100 year flood plains 20 year, what are the measures that you were taking both in the site and in the underground parking garage to protect the site from surges as well as flooding?

RAYMOND LEVIN: Okay, I know there are requirements, but these people are smarter than I am about.

NEBIL GOKCEBAY: So obviously the building isn't. It's illustrative. It's not fully designed. But there is a cellar. We are in Zone X, but you know we know where the future of the city is headed. So you know the foundation as a baseline would be waterproofed, as any other waterfront foundation would need to be just for the water in the earth, right?

GAIL BENJAMIN: And breakout. Would there be breakout walls and other things?

NEBIL GOKCEBAY: I don't know that off the top of my head? Yeah, it's right. Now. It's, you know, just is designed as a bathtub, and the structure would be designed to resist the hydrostatic pressure from the outside. It's not a wet design to allow water in and pass through. They aren't at the moment.

And because of this grading of the site, you know, we're well above at least current BFE, DFE at the top end of the site and at the occupied entry levels and things of that nature, and the only entry point into the cellar off the streetscape at the moment is the parking garage entrance, which you know is easy enough to dry proof, and in conventional detail these days anything that would ever get into the building, and could get into the garage via stairwells or elevators.

All those entry points are also above the BFE and DFE, so you know as a baseline solid waterproof backup is a starting point. You know there are bottom signs and top because there are plaza conditions.

And then addressing the limited amount of openings that could present themselves as an issue with dry proofing

GAIL BENJAMIN: And last question, it would appear from the drawings we see that you are decreasing the amount of permeability on the site. Is that correct?

NEBIL GOKCEBAY: The current site is a asphalt parking lot, right? That's been broken up over many years, and there used to be a building there that was demolished. So you know, the what's in the ground is probably a mix of the old building and earth and then repaved so historically, we're probably increasing the permutability.

I think based on the amount of green and soils at the water, we don't have the cellar plan with us, but the footprint of the cellar is actually under the building. It's not all the way to the waterfront. It doesn't go underneath the esplanade. So I think that's an important thing to, you

know, understand? And to raise point. The parking is there to accommodate what the EIS requires..

NEBIL GOKCEBAY: If there's ever an opportunity to make it smaller, I think that would be desirable to minimize that footprint.

GAIL BENJAMIN: Thank you. Great.

NEBIL GOKCEBAY: Thank you, Commissioner.

DAN GARODNICK: Mr. Vice chairman.

KENNETH J. KNUCKLES, CITY PLANNING COMMISSION, VICE CHAIR: Could you talk about the public access around the property? What would be the extent of the access?

Is it? 24 hour access to the waterfront. If not, give me the length and and breadth of the access hours.

RAYMOND LEVIN: I believe it's 24 hour I'd have to look back at the Park Department.

GAIL BENJAMIN: I think it said in the materials it said 8 to 12, I think.

KENNETH J. KNUCKLES: 6 AM to 1.

RICK PARISI: There are no fences and gates. 17 hour.

RAYMOND LEVIN: And just to make sure you heard Rick's point there. And we had this conversation with Staff.

DAN GARODNICK: Would you step up to the mic so we can hear you a little better?

RAYMOND LEVIN: Apologies, if you didn't hear Rick he was noting that there are no fences or terminations, you know, either end of the barriers, either at the visual corridor, division or at the center of the site. So it's, you know probably more of a security timeline, in that intent, just want to make that point clear.

DAN GARODNICK: Okay, thank you. Mr. Vice chairman.

RAJ RAMPERSHAD, CITY PLANNING COMMISSIONER: 2 quick questions. There's a lot of questions I was thinking about was asked by Commissioner Benjamin and Vice Chair Knuckles in terms of the hours of operation for the parking garage, would that be available during the weekends and stuff?

RAYMOND LEVIN: It’s a public parking garage, would be 24-7.

RAJ RAMPERSHAD: Okay, and what's the estimated timeline of construction? Say this does go through, what do you guys project?

RAYMOND LEVIN: Here's our construction expert. Right? Thank you.

JEFF REUBEN: Hi, good morning, Jeff Reuben. A planner with Philip Habib and Associates. As stated in the environmental impact statement, it's approximately 22 month construction period. There may be additional time, once the building's completed, for individual tenants to fit out their spaces, but in terms of overall construction period 22 months, I mean, keep in mind that the site is already vacant, so there's no need for demolition of, and so existing structures and that sort of thing.

RAYMOND LEVIN: And that time that timeline is after the 4 months that people can sue, usually banks will wait for that.

DAN GARODNICK: Okay, thank you, Commissioner.

Just a question Mr. Cerullo.

ALFRED C. CERULLO, CITY PLANNING COMMISSIONER: And just at the end of the presentation, Rick, you sort of got cut short for a moment about the loading dock, and you mentioned a pedestrian walkway that was sort of it seemed adjacent to it was hard to really understand. Could you just share what the relationship is between the loading area and the pedestrian space? Is there a conflict? How is that conflict, if there is a conflict at all, is handled?

RAYMOND LEVIN: Okay, so we spend a lot of time with DOT on how to work on the loading and the garage entrance. Originally we had a garage exit in this location that you see on this drawing where the loading docks are and DOT felt that that would have too much traffic crossing the bike lane and the public way. There's a very heavily used bike Lane along Kent. So we swap that out that the entrance and exit to the below ground. Public parking garage are on division and the loading docks are here on Kent, and we modified the design so that the trucks would come in, we'd head in and head out so that the driver is always looking at the bike path, he's never backing into the bike path.

The area that you see the truck on now like in the yellow color. I guess. That area is, as Rick mentioned, is paved in the same way as other public walkways are. So, therefore, the entrance to the building and the sidewalk adjacent to it are to a pedestrian, look like they should walk on it.

It's not asphalt, doesn't look like a driveway, but it does allow for the for the trucks to back in and out, the peak hour truck movements are 10 trucks during the peak hour which is much, much less than currently with the buses that are parked on the site.

So from the pedestrian point of view, from the bike lane point of view, we think this is the a good solution to where we have to have a loading docks, and putting the loading docks with the parking entrance, with the parking and loading for the Neftali, all on division, which is a dead end street just didn't work, and this is what we came up with, with DOT.

ALFRED C. CERULLO: I understand. Thank you for that clarification, you know just a little further explanation. So thank you.

DAN GARODNICK: Thank you, Commissioner.

GAIL BENJAMIN: Last question for me. Were there any shadow impacts on Roberto Clemente Park from this building?

JEFF REUBEN: The EIS found that there would be some shadows cast on the park, but not a shadows impact, you know, meeting the criteria that we follow the CEQR guidance.

GAIL BENJAMIN: And how significant? Obviously, they weren't significant in terms of CEQR, but can you give us an idea of… GAIL Sorry I don't have the EIS in front of me so, or the notice.

JEFF REUBEN: Oh, and candidly, nor do I. So if you like, we can get back to you in writing.

DAN GARODNICK: Great. Thank you very much.

Okay. I see no further questions for you all the applicant team. So I will thank you all for your time and attention here, and I will just take a look to see if there are members of the public who wish to testify on this item. But you are free to have a seat whenever you're ready, and I will note that I do not see members of the public wishing to testify on this item, madam Secretary, is that comport with your understanding as well. Okay, well, thank you. With that final call. Thank you. Final call for members of the public on Calendar 9, 10, 11.

Seeing none we will close the hearing on calendars 9, 10,11, and move on to our votes for today. Thank you all for allowing me to just change the order slightly. I just wanted to make sure that we had the folks who were coming in the room. Okay, madam Secretary, let's do it. Okay?

SARA AVILA: So Chair, I will just note on calendar Numbers 9, 10, and 11. The record is going to remain open through Tuesday, May 28, at 5 PM to receive written comments on the draft environmental impact statement.

DAN GARODNICK: Great.