Chapter 9: Neighborhood Character

A. INTRODUCTION

Neighborhood character is an amalgam of the many factors that combine to give an area its distinctive personality. These components include land use, scale, and type of development; historic features; patterns and volumes of traffic; noise levels; and other physical or social characteristics that help define a community. Not all of these elements affect neighborhood character in all cases; a neighborhood usually draws its distinctive character from a few determining elements.

According to the 2001 *City Environmental Quality Review (CEQR) Technical Manual*, an assessment of neighborhood character is generally needed when the action would exceed preliminary thresholds in any one of the following areas of technical analysis: land use, urban design, visual resources, historic resources, socioeconomic conditions, traffic, or noise. An assessment is also appropriate when the action would have moderate effects on several of the aforementioned areas. Potential effects on neighborhood character may include:

- *Land Use*: When development resulting from the proposed actions 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, curbcuts, 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 an action 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; or substantial differences in population or employment density.
- *Traffic and Pedestrians*. Changes in traffic and pedestrian 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 action.

According to the *CEQR Technical Manual*, such substantial traffic changes can include: changes 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 action would result in substantially different pedestrian activity and circulation, it has the potential to affect neighborhood character.

- *Noise.* According to the *CEQR Technical Manual*, for an action to affect neighborhood character in regards to noise, it would need to result in a significant adverse noise impact and a change in acceptability category.

This chapter examines neighborhood character in the area surrounding the project site and rezoning area and the action's effects on that character. The chapter's impact analysis focuses on changes to neighborhood character resulting from changes in the technical areas discussed above, since changes in these technical areas are most likely to result in changes to neighborhood character.

The analysis concludes that as a result of the proposed action, changes to the existing building design and scale on the project site would occur, as well as increases to traffic and pedestrian activity. However, these changes would not be adverse, as discussed below.

B. EXISTING CONDITIONS

The project site, zoning lot, and rezoning area are located on the block bounded by West 61st Street to the north, Eleventh Avenue to the east, West 60th Street to the south, and Twelfth Avenue to the west. Until recently, the project site contained a mix of uses, including motor vehicle repair shops, surface parking, and warehouse and commercial uses. These uses have been demolished, and the site is now vacant. The zoning lot includes the project site and two additional lots, which are developed with two 5-story residential buildings. The rezoning area includes a school and automotive and commercial uses. The area surrounding the project site and rezoning area contains a similar mix of uses.

The built environment within the study area consists of low to high-rise buildings with industrial, commercial, and residential uses. Buildings within the study area are primarily built to the lot line, without setbacks. Buildings range in height from the low-rise industrial and commercial buildings, which are plain, boxy, utilitarian structures that lack ornamentation, to the taller residential structures, such as the West End Towers, a residential complex with 16- to 39-story buildings, and the Amsterdam Houses, a superblock containing residential apartment buildings of 6- to 13-stories. There are two historic resources located in the study area: the West 59th Street Recreation House/West 60th Street Public Bath and the Consolidated Edison Power House.

The topography of the study area slopes downward toward the west toward the Hudson River. The study area is part of the Manhattan street grid pattern, with wide avenues running north-south and narrow streets running east-west, creating short wide blocks. The study area also contains a portion of the superblock that contains the Amsterdam Houses. The area is urban in character.

The area surrounding the project site is characteristic of the West Midtown and the Upper West Side of Manhattan grid pattern with major north-south avenues and east-west cross-town streets. The traffic study area is bounded by West 66th Street to the north, West 56th Street to the south,

Columbus Avenue to the east, and Route 9A (an urban north-south highway) to the west. West 57th Street is a major cross-town street in this area that operates with three lanes in each direction. West 65th and West 66th Streets, on the northern edge of the study area, connect with eastbound and westbound Central Park transverse roads to the east side of Manhattan. Of the 20 study area intersections, 4, 6, and 6 currently operate with notable service constraints in the AM, midday, and PM peak hour respectively. Further details and a summary of the delays and corresponding levels of service for the various lane group and approach movements in the study area during the three weekday analysis periods are found in Chapter 14, "Traffic and Parking."

In terms of pedestrian traffic, the area surrounding the project site is not heavily traveled by pedestrians; therefore, there is little or no congestion on sidewalks, corners, or crosswalks. All analysis locations currently operate at acceptable levels of service during the weekday AM, midday, and PM peak periods.

Existing noise levels in the area surrounding the project site and rezoning area are moderately high, but representative of similar areas in the city (i.e., daytime $L_{eq(1)}$ values range between approximately 66.8 and 75.8 A-weighted decibels [dBA]). In terms of the New York City CEQR guideline level, existing noise levels at Site 1 located on West 60th Street between Amsterdam and West End Avenues are in the "marginally acceptable" category, and existing noise levels at Site 2 and Site 3 (located on West 61st Street between Amsterdam and West End Avenues and on West End Avenue between West 59th and West 60th Streets, respectively), are in the "marginally unacceptable" category.

C. THE FUTURE WITHOUT THE PROPOSED ACTION

In the future without the proposed action, no major changes on the project site, zoning lot, or in the rezoning area are expected. It is assumed that the Heschel School, located in the rezoning area, would continue to add a class of students each year until full occupancy.

In the area immediately surrounding the project site and rezoning area, it is expected that at 2 West End Avenue, a 300-unit residential building would replace an existing gas station and other automotive use. In addition, other residential projects are anticipated, including the project currently under construction on West 57th Street between Eleventh and Twelfth Avenues (635 units), a 408-unit development currently under construction at 500 West 56th Street, a 288-unit development in Riverside South, and a 101-unit development at 223-227 West 60th Street. Several of these developments will include ground-floor retail and community facility space.

With increased development and continued growth in travel demand in the area, some congested intersections will become worse and additional intersections will become congested. The moderately high noise levels in the area (i.e., projected No Build daytime $L_{eq(1)}$ values that range between 66.8 and 68.9 dBA), which are fairly typical of similar areas in Manhattan are expected to continue. Based on anticipated development in the area, the overall character of the area is expected to become more residential with less vacant land and fewer industrial/commercial uses.

D. PROBABLE IMPACTS OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed action entails the construction of a building consisting of mid-and high-rise components of 7, 9, 14, and 27 stories on the project site, and the projected future development on Lots 58 and 61 (see Chapter 1, "Project Description").

As described in Chapter 2, "Land Use, Zoning, and Public Policy," the proposed project and the projected development under the reasonable worst-case development scenario would be in keeping with the study area's land use patterns. The proposed action would not introduce an incompatible land use or one that would conflict with land use policy or zoning for the area. The proposed action would not result in any significant adverse impacts to land use, zoning, and public policy, and therefore, no impacts to neighborhood character related to these areas would occur.

As described in Chapter 8, "Urban Design and Visual Resources," the principal effect of the proposed project and projected developments on urban design conditions would be the construction of a new building consisting of mid- and high-rise components on a site that currently contains surface parking and vacant parcels. The height, materials, and architectural treatment of the proposed building would be sympathetic to the existing urban design of the area. The proposed action would not alter any street patterns, block shapes, or visual resources. While the density on the site would be increased considerably, there are other buildings of similar height near the site, including the 33-story building to the south of the project site and the Amsterdam Houses and West End Towers to the north and west.

The new building and projected developments would not obstruct significant views or vistas in the study area, as it could be contained within an existing block form and the views are seen from areas that are and continue to be publicly accessible. The proposed building would not adversely affect the urban design character of the surrounding area, or adversely affect visual resources. Therefore, no impacts to neighborhood character as a result of changes to urban design or visual resources would occur.

The analysis in Chapter 7, "Historic Resources," found that the proposed action would not have any significant adverse visual or contextual effects on any architectural resources located in the study area. Therefore, no impacts to neighborhood character can be expected as a result of potential impacts to historic resources.

The proposed project would not have any significant adverse socioeconomic impacts. An existing motor vehicle repair shop on Lot 58 and its 5 employees could be displaced by the projected development. However, the repair shop does not define or substantially contribute to defining the neighborhood and this would not result in any impacts to neighborhood character.

The proposed project would result in significant adverse traffic impacts at three intersections during the AM peak hour, two intersections in the midday peak hour, and four intersections during the PM peak hour. These impacts could be mitigated with the implementation of measures such as retiming signal controls and daylighting at intersection approaches. With these measures in place, no adverse impacts to neighborhood character would be expected as a result of potential traffic impacts. The proposed project would not result in significant adverse pedestrian or subway operation impacts and no transit or pedestrian-related impacts to neighborhood character would occur.

In terms of noise, although the proposed project would generate new vehicle trips, it would not double traffic volumes and would not result in a perceptible change in noise levels. Therefore, no impacts to neighborhood character from increased noise levels would be expected.

In sum, the project would not adversely affect the combined elements contributing to the neighborhood character of this area of Manhattan. It would not result in any significant adverse impacts to land use, urban design, visual resources, socioeconomic conditions, or noise. Overall, no significant adverse impacts to neighborhood character would result from the proposed action. ✷