

6.7 NEIGHBORHOOD CHARACTER

6.7.1 Introduction

This Section considers the potential neighborhood character effects of the construction and operation of Shaft 33B at the E. 59th Street/Second Avenue Shaft Site. The methodology used to prepare this Section is presented in Chapter 3, “Impact Methodologies,” Section 3.7 “Neighborhood Character.” As discussed in Section 3.7, neighborhood character is generally considered to be a composite of elements that give a neighborhood its identity, including land use patterns, urban design, visual resources, historic resources, socioeconomic characteristics, traffic, and noise. This Section considers how these characteristics, evaluated separately in the other sections of this document, interact to give the neighborhood of the E. 59th Street/Second Avenue Shaft Site its unique feel. The alternative Shaft Site is located on the north side of E. 59th Street, east of Second Avenue. The general Study Area for the alternative Shaft Site is the area within 400 feet of the site, extending past the Queensboro Bridge (Bridge) to E. 61st Street on the north, to approximately 100 feet south of E. 58th Street on the south, to midway between Second and Third Avenues on the west, and to approximately 300 feet east of First Avenue on the east, since this is the area where project activities would be most noticeable. In addition, other areas where project effects might be felt were also considered during the evaluation of neighborhood character.

6.7.2 Existing Conditions

Alternative Shaft Site

The alternative Shaft Site includes a portion of the streetbed of E. 59th Street as well as paved areas below and on both sides of an approach viaduct of the Bridge that crosses above E. 59th Street. This paved area is surrounded with chain link fencing and concrete barriers and leads to the south outer roadway of the bridge, which is currently closed to traffic. The vacant site is currently in use by the New York City Department of Transportation (NYCDOT) in connection with the Queensboro Bridge Rehabilitation Program. There are no sidewalks on or surrounding the alternative Shaft Site. There are no historic resources or visual resources within the alternative Shaft Site.

Study Area

The area surrounding the alternative Shaft Site is dominated by the infrastructure of the Queensboro Bridge, which is a historic resource (this and other historic resources are described below). The granite walls of the main approach ramp form the northern boundary of the alternative Shaft Site. Immediately adjacent to the west side of the site is the main, street-level approach to the Bridge, marked by a decorative oxidized-copper lamppost above a granite pier.

Most of the Study Area for the E. 59th Street/Second Avenue Shaft Site is the same as the Study Area for the preferred Shaft Site; the portion of the Study Area east of the Queensboro Bridge entrance and exit ramps is essentially the same area encompassed by the Study Area for the preferred Shaft Site. The Study Area is a predominantly residential neighborhood, with a mix of low- to high-rise buildings with mainly commercial and residential uses. According to Census 2000, a total of nearly 27,000 people live within approximately ¼ mile of the alternative Shaft Site, in the area generally extending from E. 54th to E. 64th Streets, east of Third Avenue.

Along First Avenue, ground-floor retail uses serving the neighborhood's residents are common; uses include restaurants and bars, delis, and local services. E. 59th Street west of Second Avenue is lined with small 4- and 5-story buildings with commercial uses on the lower floors; these are generally home-related retailers, with many antiques and furniture stores. In addition to 4- to 6-story tenement (walk-up apartment) buildings, there are a number of medium- and large-scale apartment buildings and multi-story parking garages in the Study Area. The buildings are clad in a variety of materials, mostly brick, stucco, and glass. Buildings within the Study Area are primarily built to the street line; two exceptions are the Evansview Condominiums at 303 E. 60th Street and the 35-story Landmark apartments at 300 E. 59th Street, both tower apartment buildings set back behind public plazas. The buildings on the western side of Second Avenue between E. 59th and 60th Streets are set back behind a wide, open plaza (Tramway Plaza) adjacent to the tram station. North of the Bridge, land uses in the Study Area are also a mix of residential with ground-floor commercial use. Close to the Bridge exit ramp, these uses include a multi-story tennis club on E. 61st Street and a multi-story health club on E. 59th Street. The land uses north of E. 59th Street are separated and buffered from the alternative Shaft Site by the large Bridge structure. The aerial tramway to Roosevelt Island begins on the west side of Second Avenue and continues along E. 60th Street parallel to the Bridge. While the tram runs in the air above the Bridge and Study Area, its right-of-way includes several latticed steel support structures from which the tram cables hang.

The approaches and exits from the Bridge cut through the midblocks between E. 58th and E. 61st Streets and First and Second Avenues. North of E. 60th Street, the exit ramp from the Bridge runs along a steel viaduct; there is also an exit at street level below the viaduct. Traffic volumes along streets in the Study Area are generally congested during both the AM and PM peak hours, particularly at intersections close to the Queensboro Bridge. First and Second Avenues are busy arterial roadways that carry substantial traffic volumes. Several of the area cross streets, including E. 57th, E. 59th, and E. 61st Street, serve substantial volumes and are feeder routes to and from the Queensboro Bridge and the FDR Drive. Pedestrian activity within the Study Area can be characterized as low to moderate. The M15, M15 (Limited), M31, and M57 bus routes all operate near the alternative Shaft Site. Ambient noise levels near the site are above the CEQR threshold of acceptability; the primary factor influencing noise levels is vehicular traffic.

The Study Area contains three historic resources: the Queensboro Bridge, immediately adjacent to the alternative Shaft Site, and 311 and 313 E. 58th Street, which are small brick townhouses. The Queensboro Bridge is a through-type, multi-span cantilever bridge constructed of steel with Beaux Arts granite components. From the Study Area, various elements of the Queensboro

Bridge can be seen, including the approach ramps and viaduct, which are clad in rusticated granite; the Manhattan-side steel tower; and the decorative copper-clad lamppost at the Second Avenue entrance. Also visible in views north and east are the steel towers of the Roosevelt Island tram structure; views east also include a tall, tan brick smokestack, located immediately adjacent to the Bridge near the East River, and the modern glass pavilion of the Terence Conran Shop, set in the Bridgemarket plaza. Views east along E. 60th Street are of the Bridge, the steel support structures of the Roosevelt Island tramway, and the steel exit ramp of the Bridge above the street. The alternative Shaft Site can only be seen within its immediately adjacent area: the area along E. 59th Street on both sides of the Bridge viaduct, and along Second Avenue generally from south of E. 60th Street.

There are seven publicly accessible open spaces in the Study Area, all of which are bonus plazas adjacent to apartment buildings, as well as the shared “multi-use” area, commonly referred to as 14 Honey Locusts Park, which is used by the NYCDOT and as a public space. There are street trees along sidewalks throughout the Study Area, including along the south side of E. 59th Street between First and Second Avenues, as well as nine trees in the multi-use area to the east of the Site.

The Study Area can be generally characterized as a densely populated, noisy, and thriving section of East Midtown /lower Upper East Side of Manhattan. Shops and restaurants generally serving the needs of local residents exist mainly on the ground floors of buildings along Second Avenue. Large apartment complexes, many with public plazas, line the avenues and cross streets. The area has abundant street greenery, especially on the cross streets, which are generally lined with larger street trees and some plantings. The neighborhood surrounding the alternative Shaft Site is also greatly influenced by the presence of the Queensboro Bridge, which brings substantial vehicular and commercial traffic volumes through the Study Area roadways each day. Noise generated by vehicular traffic is the primary contributor to the high noise levels present throughout the Study Area.

6.7.3 Future Conditions Without the Project

In the Future Without the Project, the character of the alternative Shaft Site and its surrounding Study Area is not expected to change considerably. No development projects are anticipated in the Study Area. The Queensboro Bridge is currently undergoing reconstruction and rehabilitation. As part of that project, NYCDOT is using some of the roadway shoulder alongside the Bridge, including the E. 59th Street/Second Avenue Shaft Site, as a construction staging area.

The New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (NYCDPR) is planning enhancements for the multi-use area east of the site upon completion of the Queensboro Bridge rehabilitation program. Those enhancements may change the appearance of the multi-use area by adding landscaping and seating to an area that currently has no such amenities. NYCDPR also is planning to rehabilitate Tramway Plaza, providing new landscaping and other features at this plaza along Second Avenue, improving its condition and possibly encouraging greater use.

In general, the projects that are planned for the Study Area would not be expected to create any substantial changes to the character of the neighborhood. The Queensboro Bridge rehabilitation program would not significantly alter any natural features, street patterns, block shapes, or travel patterns in the area. Traffic and noise levels would be expected to be similar to existing levels. Pedestrian activity would be expected to remain moderate. Views of historic and visual resources, including views from the alternative Shaft Site as well as views from elsewhere in the Study Area, would not change from existing conditions.

6.7.4 Future Conditions With the Project

Construction

Shaft 33B

The presence of a 20-foot-high construction barrier around the alternative Shaft Site during construction would result in a similar streetscape to what exists today on the western portion of the site and will continue in the Future Without the Project. The only construction equipment visible above the barrier from street level would be a crane and, possibly, a concrete truck enclosure. However, construction activities for the project would be more noticeable to surrounding land uses than the current Bridge staging activities that occur on the site today and that will continue in the Future Without the Project. The lighting to be installed around the site for night construction work would be noticeable from the surrounding area, but would not be substantially different from the lighting that already illuminates the Study Area at night.

Construction activity would be disruptive to the nearest sensitive land uses, which are the residences directly across E. 59th Street from the alternative Shaft Site. Disruptions during construction would include noise, dust, and traffic associated with the construction activity. As discussed in Section 6.12, “Noise,” potential significant adverse noise impact are expected to occur during several stages of the construction period. While there is the potential for significant adverse noise impacts, these noise impacts would not result in an adverse impact on the character of the neighborhood because the area surrounding the alternative Shaft Site already experience high noise levels and because noise is not the only factor contributing to neighborhood character in this area. At locations elsewhere in the Study Area, construction activities at the alternative Shaft Site would be less perceptible. The construction activity at the alternative Shaft Site would not be expected to result in potential significant adverse impacts to people’s enjoyment of open spaces in the surrounding area.

Blasting activities would require the temporary shutdown once or twice per day of traffic and pedestrian movements near the alternative Shaft Site, for approximately four months if raise bore excavation is used or 12 months if surface excavation is used; this would potentially result in short-term disruptions of vehicular traffic. These disruptions would be short-term and intermittent. For the remainder of the construction period, construction activity would generate a low amount of vehicular traffic and would not result in significant traffic impacts, although some intermittent disruptions could occur. Overall, traffic changes would not be expected to result in potential significant adverse impacts to neighborhood character during the construction period.

However, in recognition of the area's high traffic volumes, NYCDEP will provide funding for as many Traffic Enforcement Agents (TEAs) at the alternative Shaft Site as are appropriate to assist in maintaining sufficient vehicular and pedestrian flow throughout the construction period.

The construction activities would not involve any changes to block form; street pattern or hierarchy; topography; natural features; or building arrangement, bulk, use, or type within the Study Area. The historic structures at 311 and 313 E. 58th Street are located approximately 150 feet from the alternative Shaft Site, and therefore are too far away to be adversely affected by project construction. To ensure that no potential significant adverse impacts occur to the Queensboro Bridge as a result of any of the proposed construction activities, a construction protection plan for that property will be developed and implemented prior to construction in consultation with NYCLPC. Protection of the Queensboro Bridge would occur during all phases of construction. The enclosure and construction equipment and activity on the alternative Shaft Site would not eliminate views from the Study Area to surrounding visual resources; nor would they become a dominant element of such views.

In sum, the construction of Shaft 33B at the alternative Shaft Site would be expected to be intrusive at times to surrounding residents in terms of increased noise levels and potential traffic disruptions. This type of construction disturbance is fairly typical of other construction projects that occur throughout the City, and it would not be expected to influence land use or development patterns. During the construction period, NYCDEP would address noise and traffic disruptions, as discussed in Sections 6.9, "Traffic and Parking," 6.12, "Noise," and 6.16, "Mitigation." Overall, construction at the site would not be anticipated to result in potential significant adverse effects to the combined elements contributing to the neighborhood character of the Study Area.

Water Main Connections

As discussed in Section 5.7, "Neighborhood Character," construction of the water mains would be disruptive to surrounding land uses—in terms of dust and emissions from construction equipment and potential temporary adverse traffic and noise impacts along the routes and extending to some intersections beyond. However, given the brief duration of the construction disturbance in specific areas, and the generally limited nature of the potential changes, the construction activities associated with the new water mains would not be anticipated to result in any significant adverse impacts to neighborhood character. As described in Section 5.16, the water main construction project would employ an aggressive traffic management plan to minimize to the extent practicable the traffic disruptions that would occur as a result of water main construction.

Conclusions

As discussed above, neither construction of Shaft 33B at the alternative Shaft Site nor construction of the water mains would result in significant adverse impacts on the combined elements that contribute to the neighborhood character of the Study Area. Construction activities would be disruptive in the areas immediately surrounding the construction sites; however, at other locations throughout the Study Area, construction activities would be less perceptible.

Operation

During operation of the project, three permanent above-ground structures would be added to the alternative Shaft Site: a 10-foot-tall, 14-inch diameter air vent and two 3-foot-tall, 6-inch diameter hydrants. These structures would be visible additions to the streetscape, but are relatively unobtrusive and small in size and would be congruous with street furniture that is found in the Study Area in existing conditions. Certain surface features of Shaft 33B, such as two relatively small flush-mounted hatchways that provide access to the shaft, a small (10-foot-high by 14-inch diameter) air vent located on the site, and up to two air release hydrants (3-foot high by 6-inch diameter), may take up some ground-level area at the alternative Shaft Site; however, as discussed above, there are no sidewalks on or surrounding the alternative Shaft Site, and thus this potential reduction in usable ground-level area would not result in any significant adverse pedestrian impacts.

The project—including Shaft 33B and the water mains—would not involve any changes to block form; street pattern or hierarchy; topography; natural features; or building arrangement, bulk, use, or type within the Study Area. The operational above-ground structures associated with Shaft 33B (there would be no above-ground features associated with the water mains) would not eliminate views from the Study Area to surrounding historic and/or visual resources; nor would they become a dominant element of such views. No permanent changes in land use would occur as a result of the operation of Shaft 33B and the water mains. Operation of Shaft 33B at the alternative Shaft Site and the water mains is not anticipated to have potential direct or indirect adverse impacts on any publicly accessible open spaces; they would not be located in an open space and would not affect the utilization of any open spaces in the surrounding area. Activities associated with operation of Shaft 33B at the alternative Shaft Site and the water mains would not result in increased traffic or increased noise or vibration levels at the site.

In sum, the operation of Shaft 33B at the alternative Shaft Site and the water mains would not significantly adversely affect the combined elements contributing to the neighborhood character of the Study Area. No significant adverse impacts to neighborhood character would result from operation of the Shaft 33B project. ◆