

# The Hudson Yards Community Advisory Committee

c/o Manhattan Community Board No. 4  
330 West 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, 26<sup>th</sup> Floor  
New York, NY 10036

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May 23, 2007

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Dear Ann, Regina and Bill:

Thank you for your presentation to the West Side community at the public forum on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2007. From our perspective, the forum was a big step forward toward an engaged public conversation about development on the West Side Rail Yards, and we are grateful for the significant effort we know you put into making the presentation. Complicated technical issues were clearly explained, and members of our community were able to begin to comprehend the scale of this vast undertaking and the direction of your planning work over the last six to seven months.

The large turnout and the comments made after the presentation confirm that there are **two issues of paramount importance** to this community: **affordable housing** and **preservation of the High Line**. We have written in greater detail on those issues and others in our letter dated February 8, 2007.

We find ourselves caught between a desire to provide constructive comment on particular elements of the plan and frustration that fundamental planning issues are being ignored or have yet to be addressed. We therefore offer some specific comments on more detailed elements of the plan, and some broader comments on the plan's overall direction.

Before commenting, however, we want to note that the planning process you are engaged in represents a significant improvement over the usual process for a general project plan for a state action, and we are grateful for the opportunities we have had to provide comments and discuss the issues as the plan is being developed. Several aspects of the plan have improved significantly as a result, most notably the open space plan and site access. By offering the

following critical comments, we do not diminish the effort we know your team has made to consider our concerns.

## DETAILS

1. The **open space must be designed and operated as a public park**, serving the needs of users beyond the owners and occupants of the new buildings on the Rail Yards. The open space should therefore be designed and operated by the Hudson River Park Trust, with funding provided by the developer and with involvement by all stakeholders including this community.
2. The RFP should require that the **landscaping of the High Line** or the High Line easement should be **designed in coordination** with the landscaping for the High Line park south of 30<sup>th</sup> Street.
3. The **bridge to Hudson River Park** will significantly enhance the park and the open space on the Rail Yards by creating a pedestrian link between the two. Every effort must be made to fund and construct this element of the open space plan.
4. We are pleased that the plan will now include a **630-seat PS/IS school**. However, the RFP must be clear and specific about the location and amount of space that will be required for the school site. The school must include an outdoor playground and separate dedicated spaces for a gymnasium, cafeteria and a library. In addition, the school must include at least one science lab that meets state specifications for the elementary and middle school levels.
5. The presentation identified two locations where **off-site affordable housing** could be developed. We do wish to work with you to further develop these and other opportunities; they must, however, be balanced with other neighborhood considerations.
  - **MTA site** – Ninth Avenue between 53<sup>rd</sup> and 54<sup>th</sup> Streets. We would be delighted to see this site developed, since this gravel parking lot surrounded by cyclone fencing has been a neighborhood eyesore for years. However, this site is in the heart of the Preservation Area of the Special Clinton District, and must be developed consistent with the area's lower density and building heights.
    - a. Buildings should conform to Section 96-104 of the Zoning Resolution (maximum heights of 85 feet on the avenue and 66 feet in the midblock), without resort to special permits for additional height.
    - b. Housing on this site should meet CB4's basic range of recommended affordability: 50% of the units should be affordable to households making up to 80% of Area Median Income, 30% of the units should be affordable to households making up to 125% of AMI and 20% should be affordable to households making up to 165% of AMI.
  - **DEP site** – Tenth Avenue between 48<sup>th</sup> and 49<sup>th</sup> Streets. DEP is currently digging the Third Water Tunnel on the southeast corner of this site, and will require permanent

access to the shaft once the tunnel is complete. For years this community has been fighting to establish Hell's Kitchen Park West on this site, a park for older children and teens, to complement Hell's Kitchen Park across the street and one block south, which recently was rebuilt for smaller children. This effort cannot be abandoned. There must be an internal conversation with the local community about the extent to which affordable housing can also be accommodated on this site. We are in the process of setting up that conversation, and will report back to you shortly. To facilitate that conversation, however, we would be grateful if you would supply us with any preliminary information you may have about possible development scenarios.

6. The RFP should **require residential uses along 30<sup>th</sup> Street**, so that it in fact develops as a residential corridor as shown in the presentation.
7. There must be an opportunity for **public review of all responses to the RFP** before a proposal is selected by MTA. This will ensure a broad public understanding of the choices involved for this large public site.

## **OVERALL DIRECTION**

Though we appreciate the dialogue that surrounds the specifics of the RFP and of some portions of planning for the site, we remain concerned that important planning principles are being ignored or left to an unspecified future date to resolve. We have discussed some of these concerns with you and with other stakeholders before, but they remain fundamental to any site plan that the community can endorse for the Rail Yards.

1. **The plan for on-site affordable housing is inadequate.** While the presentation indicates that up to 20% of the on-site rental units would be affordable through the 80/20 program, the many variables inherent in this statement of the plan could mean that very few affordable units will ultimately be developed on the Rail Yards, and that none of them will be permanently affordable. Instead the planning vision seems to prefer or at least accept the real possibility that virtually all residential development on the Rail Yards could be market rate condominiums, creating an enclave on this choice waterfront site akin to a suburban gated community. We hold our neighborhood's diversity to be a central component of our character, and this large public site must be harnessed to enhance, not diminish, that diversity.

The amount of on-site affordable housing must be specific, substantial, distributed throughout the site, and permanent. This must be a clear requirement in the RFP, and not left to the vagaries of the developer's choice or the availability of the 80/20 program in the future.

2. **The High Line must be preserved.** Since the City and the MTA now share the goal of preserving the High Line, we would expect that the RFP should specifically require preservation of the High Line historic structure, in its current location, on the Eastern and Western Rail Yards. In fact, there is nothing that distinguishes this piece of the High

Line from the portion that the City has already preserved through the West Chelsea rezoning, and the two portions should be treated in the same way, with a similar commitment to preservation.

3. **Planning for public facilities is essential.** The scale of the proposed development for the East and West Rail Yards is monumental. What is contemplated here is truly a community of the future. But to be a successful community, more planning is needed than simply figuring out where to put the buildings and still keep the trains running. How will people live and work in this new area? Is there adequate capacity to deliver electricity and water and remove sewage? How will public safety be ensured? How can this traffic-choked area absorb the increased traffic that the proposed development will inevitably bring? There was no mention of these fundamental environmental concerns in the presentation, yet it seems short-sighted to us not to consider these issues while the plan is being developed.
4. **Development should be primarily residential.** The Conceptual Site Plan Organization shows commercial development at the northeast corner of the WRY, closest to the planned subway station, and residential development on the balance of the development sites. We agree that this is a desirable mix of commercial and residential development. The RFP should more closely reflect this vision, by requiring development to be 60% to 80% residential.
5. **Green building standards must be a requirement, not an aspiration.** Particularly against the background of PlaNYC and the commitments of the Mayor and Governor to sustainability, the RFP must require that all development, including the open space, should meet or exceed the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design" (LEED) silver standards.

We do appreciate the ongoing conversation that you are willing to have with the community and with other stakeholders about planning and design for the site—we feel that an honest dialogue will make the development of the Rail Yards stronger and more integrated with the city that it is intended to serve. Please feel free to contact us to discuss any of these concerns in more detail; we look forward to continuing our dialogue as the planning process moves forward.

Sincerely,



Anna Hayes Levin  
Chair

Cc: HYCAC members