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 an 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 action 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 such streetscape elements as streetwalls, landscaping, and curb cuts. 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, changes in traffic patterns, changes in roadway classifications, changes 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 with regard to noise, it would need to result in a significant adverse noise impact and a change in acceptability category.

This chapter examines how the proposed action would affect neighborhood character in a study area defined as within a ¼-mile radius of the project site and rezoning area. The chapter's impact analysis focuses primarily 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.

B. PRINCIPAL CONCLUSIONS

The proposed action would not adversely affect the combined elements contributing to the neighborhood character of the downtown area of Flushing, Queens. Specifically, it would not cause any significant adverse impacts to land use, urban design, visual resources, socioeconomic conditions, pedestrian conditions, or noise.

The proposed action would result in the development of Flushing Commons, a mixed-use project containing residential, commercial, community facility, and possibly hotel uses at the site of existing Municipal Lot 1. The proposed project would result in a major change in land use on the project site. However, this change is considered to be complementary to the area, as it would create a mixed-use development that would bring new residents, workers, and visitors to the area as well as serve the existing Downtown Flushing community. The Flushing Commons project would bring additional housing to an established residential neighborhood. The overall size and scale of the Flushing Commons project would correspond to the area's role as a regional center of retail and commerce. The proposed Flushing Commons project would also include approximately 1.5 acres of passive open space on the site—an amenity that is considerably absent in Downtown Flushing.

The buildings to be developed on the project site would cast incremental shadow on the arched windows of the Macedonia African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. The incremental shadow would reduce the amount of direct sunlight that currently shines through these windows throughout the year and cause a significant adverse shadow impact for the users of this place of worship. However, the shadow impact would only be on the interior functionality of the church, and it would not significantly impair the public's enjoyment of the church as a historic resource. Therefore, the significant adverse historic resources impact on the Macedonia AME Church from shadows would not result in a significant adverse impact on neighborhood character.

The proposed action would result in unmitigated traffic impacts at 13 locations during the weekday AM peak hour, 11 locations during the weekday midday peak hour, 13 locations during the weekday PM peak hour, and 14 locations during the Saturday midday peak hour. However, service levels at most of these study area analysis locations would be the same with or without the proposed action even though, in accordance with CEQR criteria, the increases in delays resulted in these impacts. It is also important to note that the City is considering several

scenarios to improve traffic and safety in Downtown Flushing as alternatives to the contra-flow bus lane configuration analyzed in this FEIS. The City continues to analyze other scenarios and it is possible that some of the unmitigated traffic impacts may be eliminated. One of these scenarios is the Modified Two-Way proposal. An analysis of the proposed action's potential traffic impacts with this proposal implemented was prepared for this FEIS. The results of this analysis show that unmitigated traffic impacts would result at 5 locations during the weekday AM peak hour, 10 locations during the weekday midday peak hour, 8 locations during the weekday PM peak hour, and 13 locations during the Saturday midday peak hour. Overall, no significant adverse impacts to neighborhood character would result from the proposed action.

C. EXISTING CONDITIONS

The rezoning area is a large, square block. The project site and the majority of the remainder of the rezoning area are currently occupied by Municipal Lot 1, an approximately 1,100-space parking lot. The eastern portion of the lot is at street level, while the western portion is a bi-level parking deck.

The remainder of the rezoning area is also occupied by the Macedonia AME Church, located adjacent to the project site to the east along Union Street. The Macedonia AME Church is the third-oldest church in Flushing, having been organized in 1811. In the years before the Civil War, members of the church's congregation and its pastor, Edward Africanus, were active in the early struggle for African American civil rights. In addition, the church is reported to have been used to house fugitive slaves and, according to the Queens Historical Society, is one of four recognized Underground Railroad sites in Queens.[1] This two-story red brick church features stained glass windows on the southern façade and small glass arched windows along the western façade. A short, square tower stands atop the southeast corner of the church. A one-story unornamented red brick addition is connected to the older church structure at its eastern edge. Although the church's current buildings do not date from the period of significance (i.e., pre-Civil War), the site is considered to be a potential historic resource due to the church's longstanding significance to the African American (and, potentially, Underground Railroad) history of Flushing.

The project site and surrounding area are located in the heart of Downtown Flushing, the regional commercial hub for Queens. The downtown area is a vibrant center of retail activity that contains large national chains as well as an enormous variety of smaller convenience and shoppers' goods stores, a large portion of which cater extensively to the surrounding Asian population. Radiating from this commercial core, downtown is surrounded by residential and mixed-use land use patterns.

Main Street is the commercial spine of the neighborhood, characteristic of an active and dense streetscape. For the most part, the commercial buildings are low to midrise, attached, and built to the lot line, creating continuous streetwalls. The facades of many buildings, especially along Main and Union Streets, are almost entirely covered with large bright signs, and some have awnings which project over the sidewalks. The blocks south of the rezoning area near the intersection of Main Street and Roosevelt Avenue are very active, containing such big-box retail establishments as Old Navy, Macy's, and the former Caldor, as well as the entrance to the No. 7 subway station.

[1] http://www.queenshistoricalsociety.org/freedom.html

Residential uses are largely located in the eastern portion of the study area, with rental and condominium apartment buildings, and single- and two-family attached and detached homes. High-rise residences, ranging between six and 12 stories, are concentrated in the immediate vicinity of the rezoning area to the north, east, and south, while lower-density housing dominates farther out. A variety of institutional uses are scattered throughout the study area among the residential uses. These include several public schools, hospitals, religious institutions, senior housing facilities, community centers, and local branches of the post office.

Downtown Flushing is considerably deficient in usable open space areas. The area lacks quality passive open space resources that offer seating, shade trees, and/or natural lawn areas or plazas that can be used as public gathering spaces. In the densest portion of Downtown Flushing nearest the Main Street subway station, the steps of the Flushing branch of the Queens Public Library (the triangular space at the corner of Kissena Boulevard and 41st Avenue) is heavily used for seating and a gathering/meeting place.

The area contains a mix of building types, styles, heights, and uses. The majority of buildings are clad in dark red brick; however, the area also contains several newly constructed buildings clad in modern materials, such as reflective glass. These newer buildings range in height and create a varied skyline with the surrounding area.

Queens Crossing, a recently completed development immediately west of the rezoning area, contains a 12-story building with both retail and office uses. The new building has a solid base, topped with a stepped tower and a gentle curve along 39th Avenue. The Queens Crossing development creates a solid streetwall along 138th Street and curved streetwall along 39th Avenue at the intersection of 138th Street. It also creates a new, actively used, modern building that is taller than some of the surrounding buildings.

Several historic resources located in the vicinity of the rezoning area characterize the history of the village of Flushing as being one of the earliest permanent villages established in Queens. The Friends Meeting House (NHL, S/NR-listed, NYCL) is located along the south side of Northern Boulevard, one block north of the rezoning area. Except from 1776 to 1783, when the British used it as a prison, hospital, and stable, the structure has served continuously as a meeting house. St. George's Protestant Episcopal Church, Old Parish House, and Graveyard (S/NR-listed, NYCL) are located along Main Street, west of the rezoning area. The church was built in 1894 and a masonry wall encloses the churchyard, which contains gravestones and memorials dating to the 18th and early 19th centuries. The Flushing Armory (S/NR-listed), Flushing Town Hall, now Flushing Council on Culture and the Arts, (NYCL); and Bowne Street Community Church, originally Reformed Church of Flushing, (NYCL calendared 9/23/03) are other notable historic resources in the area.

The housing vacancy rate in the study area is low, compared with the vacancy rate for Queens and New York City overall, indicating a high demand for housing. The population of the study area also grew more than it did in Queens and New York City overall between 2000 and 2005. However, the median income for the study area is less than that of Queens and New York City overall.

The streets in the study area are generally straight and meet at right angles, but they are irregularly spaced, creating blocks of various sizes and shapes. The primary streets in the study area include Union Street and Main Street, which are north-south streets with two lanes of traffic and a parking lane/bus stop running in each direction; and Roosevelt Avenue to the south, which is a major thoroughfare with two lanes of traffic running in each direction. Northern Boulevard

is a major two-way east/west arterial and truck route traversing the entire borough of Queens. In this location to the north of the project site, Northern Boulevard contains three travel lanes and one parking lane in each direction. Smaller cross streets in the study area include 37th, 38th, and 39th Avenues. These avenues are narrower than the main streets and have traffic running in only one direction.

The majority of the intersections along the major east-west thoroughfares of Roosevelt Avenue and Northern Boulevard are congested. The north-south corridors of Union and Main Streets both contain one intersection that is congested. None of the intersections along the side street corridors of 37th, 38th, 39th, and Sanford Avenues experience congestion.

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 61.4 and 72.5 A-weighted decibels [dBA]). In terms of the New York City CEQR guideline level, existing noise levels at Site 1 (located on 38th Avenue between Union and Bowne Streets) and Site 3 (located on 37th Avenue between Union and 138th Streets) are in the "marginally acceptable" category. Existing noise levels at Site 2 (located on Union Street between 37th and 38th Avenues), Site 4 (located on 138th Street between 37th and 38th Avenues), Site 5 (38th Avenue between 138th and Main Streets), and Site 6 (located on 39th Avenue between Union and 138th Streets) are in the "marginally unacceptable" category.

D. THE FUTURE WITHOUT THE PROPOSED ACTION

Without the proposed action, the project site and remainder of the rezoning area would continue to be occupied by Municipal Lot 1 and the Macedonia AME Church. The Downtown Flushing area has been in the midst of a development boom for the past several years, which is anticipated to continue in the future without the proposed action. New residential, mixed-use, and commercial projects will add new office and retail space, and new employees and residents to the downtown area in the future without the proposed action.

Two projects located north of Northern Boulevard are proposed by New Millennium Developers, one at the former Sears site at Northern Boulevard and Leavitt Street and the other at 35th Avenue and Prince Street. If approved, both projects would redevelop existing underutilized commercial properties into mixed-use developments containing retail, residential, community facility, and hotel uses. These new projects would add to the existing strong retail and commercial base of Downtown Flushing.

Larger residential projects, predominately for market rate units, will be developed in the future without the proposed action and result in further growth to the residential character of the area. These include residential developments at Main Street and Northern Boulevard, the Victoria Tower Project at Main Street, and the SkyView Parc/Queens Town Center (Muss) development at College Point Blvd and 40th Road. It is anticipated that these projects will introduce more costly housing than what is typical of the existing housing stock. Numerous small residential projects, ranging from six to 30 units, are also under construction in the study area.

In addition to the development projects described above, New York City intends to turn Main Street and Union Street into one-way streets. Traffic will flow north on Main Street and south on Union Street. There will be no changes to the streetscape elements, block shapes, or street pattern with these traffic changes. The most notable change will be street markings that delineate dedicated bus lanes and potentially wider sidewalks along certain segments of the two streets.

All the intersections along the Roosevelt Avenue and Northern Boulevard corridors that are congested in existing conditions would remain congested in the future without the proposed action. Reconfiguring Main Street to one-way northbound and Union Street to one-way southbound will change traffic patterns and intersection operations at several intersections along the two streets. Accounting also for an increase in background traffic volumes, the Union Street corridor, which is congested under existing conditions only at its intersection with Sanford Avenue, would be also congested at its intersections with 37th and 38th Avenues. Similarly, the Main Street corridor, which has only one congested intersection under existing conditions, would be congested at three additional intersections. Contrary to existing conditions, where none of the intersections along the side street corridors of 37th, 38th, 39th, and Sanford Avenues experience congestion, there would be one congested intersection along the 37th and 39th Avenue corridors and both intersections along the Sanford Avenue corridors would be congested. Subsequent to the publication of the DEIS, the New York City Department of Transportation (NYCDOT), through its ongoing efforts to improve vehicular and pedestrian traffic conditions in downtown Flushing, developed a proposal for an alternative roadway configuration (Modified Two-Way) for further study. Although still a proposal, NYCDOT believes that the Modified Two-Way proposal, which would essentially retain most of the existing roadway configuration for Main and Union Streets but would impose several turn prohibitions and a street direction reversal with the possibility of incorporating pedestrian space improvements, if implemented, may improve traffic flow and safety in downtown Flushing. NYCDOT continues to study this proposal. The analyses prepared and presented in this FEIS for the Modified Two-Way proposal show that operations in the future without the proposed action would be more favorable with the Modified Two-Way proposal than with the One-Way Pair with Contra Flow bus lanes.

Future noise levels in the surrounding area would increase overall, but this increase would be less than 3 dBA (i.e., projected No Build daytime $L_{eq(1)}$ values that range between 61.7 and 72.6 dBA). Increases of this magnitude would be barely perceptible. At Sites 1, 2, 5, and 6, during certain time periods, there would be a decrease in noise levels from existing conditions. This would result from decreases in traffic at these locations during these time periods as a result of directional flow changes.

E. PROBABLE IMPACTS OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed action would allow for the development of Flushing Commons, a mixed-use development containing residential, commercial, community facility, and possibly hotel uses; a multi-level underground parking garage; and an approximately 1.5-acre town square-style publicly accessible, privately owned open space to be constructed on the project site. The proposed project would result in a major change in land use on the project site. This change is considered to be complementary to the area, as it would create a mixed-use development that would bring new residents, workers, and visitors to the area as well as serve the existing Downtown Flushing community. The Flushing Commons project would bring additional housing to an established residential neighborhood. The overall size and scale of the Flushing Commons project would correspond to the area's role as a regional center of retail and commerce.

As the project site is currently a paved parking lot, the proposed Flushing Commons project would greatly change the urban design characteristics of the site; however, this would be an improvement over the underutilized site. The proposed project would replace the one-story

parking structure with four new buildings of various heights (which would create new streetwalls) and public open spaces. The proposed project would add new uses and vitality to the site and improve the overall appearance of the site. The proposed project would provide a significant open space that is currently missing from the urban fabric of Downtown Flushing—a town square.

The proposed buildings would be an improvement over the current underutilization of the project site by creating street life and activity through ground-floor commercial spaces, including stores, restaurants and cafes, and open space. The residential, commercial, and office uses of the proposed buildings would be consistent with the predominant uses in the study area. There is a wide variety of building styles and materials used in the area; thus, the design of the buildings and mix of materials would be in keeping with what is currently found in the study area. While the new buildings would be taller and have larger footprints than some of the buildings in the surrounding area, they would be in keeping with other large-scale developments in the area, including the Queens Crossing development and the condominium building to the south of the site. The transformation of land uses and urban design at the project site, while substantial, would not result in any significant adverse impacts on land use or urban design and visual resources.

The proposed Flushing Commons project would include approximately 1.5 acres of passive open space on the site. The main portion of this space would be an elliptical green opening onto 138th Street that is expected to contain a terraced lawn, formal plaza, trees, tables and chairs, additional seating, and a water feature. This new open space would provide a quality passive open space amenity (green, landscaped, and relatively separated from major traffic flows) that is notably absent in Downtown Flushing.

The new residential units associated with the proposed Flushing Commons are expected to be more costly than what is typical of the existing housing stock, but they would be comparable to other new residential developments under construction or planned in the future without the proposed action. It is likely that residents living in the Flushing Commons units would have a higher income than most existing residents; however, the new residents would not constitute a sizable addition to the study area population and therefore would not change the overall socioeconomic profile of the study area population to affect neighborhood character. The proposed amount of new retail is not enough to create a substantially different customer base for the area to lead to an increase in rents. While the proposed project may have high retail rents, as a new project in the area and a project with larger and more high-end spaces, these types of retail stores are not likely to compete directly with many of the existing retail businesses in the surrounding area. To the contrary, the dynamic mix of commercial and residential uses added by the proposed action would draw existing residents and additional shoppers to the neighborhood's stores, further enlivening an area already known for its vibrant commercial district.

The proposed action is not expected to result in redevelopment of the existing Macedonia AME Church.[2] The proposed action is allowing the church to pursue an affordable housing development on the site (the reasonable worst-case development scenario for the portion of Lot 25 north of the church). In this scenario, it is possible that some construction activities would occur within 90 feet of the church. Therefore it is anticipated that the disposition of this site

[2] Although there are future plans to expand and/or renovate the Macedonia AME Church site, these plans and any associated actions, are not included in the proposed action and therefore not included in this EIS.

would include a condition requiring the church and/or the future developer of this area to develop and implement a construction protection plan, reviewed and approved by LPC, to protect the adjacent church building.

The proposed Flushing Commons development would be immediately adjacent to the church building. The context of the church would be somewhat altered by the addition of taller, modern mixed-use buildings to the project site; however, the church already exists in a mixed visual environment, and this change is not considered a significant adverse impact. The buildings to be developed on the project site would cast incremental shadow on the arched windows of the Macedonia AME Church. The incremental shadow would reduce the amount of direct sunlight that currently shines through these windows throughout the year and would cause a significant adverse shadow impact for the users of this place of worship. As noted above, the existing church buildings do not date from the period of historical significance (i.e., pre-Civil War). The church as a potential historic resource is defined by its longstanding significance to the African American (and, potentially, Underground Railroad) history of Flushing. The shadow impact is only on the interior functionality of the church, and it would not significantly impair the public's enjoyment of the church as a historic resource. Therefore, the significant adverse historic resources impact on the Macedonia AME Church from shadows would not result in a significant adverse impact on neighborhood character.

The project site is located far enough away from the surrounding areas' other historic resources, and so the proposed development would not have any direct, physical effects on these off-site resources. The architectural resources already exist in a built context that includes a mix of both short and tall commercial and residential buildings. Therefore, while the heights of the proposed buildings would be taller than the existing structures on the project site, they would not be incompatible with buildings in the study area.

Of the 30 traffic intersections analyzed in the study area, the proposed action would result in significant adverse impacts at 17 intersections during the weekday AM peak hour, 16 intersections during the weekday midday peak hour, 19 intersections during the weekday PM peak hour, and 21 intersections during the Saturday midday peak hour. Although the implementation of such measures as retiming signal controls and adding a new traffic signal would fully mitigate the projected significant adverse impacts at some of the study area intersections, unmitigated traffic impacts would remain at 13 locations during the weekday AM peak hour, 11 locations during the weekday midday peak hour, 13 locations during the weekday PM peak hour, and 14 locations during the Saturday midday peak hour. However, service levels at most of these study area analysis locations would be the same with or without the proposed action. It is also important to note that the City is considering several scenarios to improve traffic and safety in Downtown Flushing as alternatives to the contra-flow bus lane configuration analyzed in this FEIS. The City continues to analyze other scenarios and it is possible that some of the unmitigated traffic impacts may be eliminated. One of these scenarios is the Modified Two-Way proposal. An analysis of the proposed action's potential traffic impacts with this proposal implemented was prepared for this FEIS. The results of this analysis show that, if the Modified Two-Way proposal is implemented, the proposed action would result in significant adverse impacts at 12 intersections during the weekday AM peak hour, 15 intersections during the weekday midday peak hour, 18 intersections during the weekday PM peak hour, and 20 intersections during the Saturday midday peak hour. Unmitigated traffic impacts would result at 5 locations during the weekday AM peak hour, 10 locations during the weekday midday peak hour, 8 locations during the weekday PM peak hour, and 13 locations during the Saturday

midday peak hour. Overall, the above changes resulting from the proposed action would not significantly affect the character of roadways in downtown Flushing.

In terms of noise, although the proposed action would generate new vehicle trips, it would not result in a perceptible change in noise levels. At Sites 1, 2, and 4 during certain time periods, there would be a decrease in noise levels in the future with the proposed action, compared with conditions in the future without the proposed action. This would result from decreases in traffic at these locations during these time periods as a result of changes in the configuration of public parking on the project site. Noise levels at Site 1 would change from the "marginally acceptable" category to the "clearly acceptable" category, noise levels at Site 3 would remain in the "marginally acceptable" category, and noise levels at Sites 2, 4, 5, and 6 would remain in the "marginally unacceptable" category. Therefore, no impacts to neighborhood character from increased noise levels are expected. ✷