

West 108th Street WSFSSH Development

Chapter 11: Neighborhood Character

A. INTRODUCTION

This chapter assesses the Proposed Actions' potential effects on neighborhood character. As defined in the *City Environmental Quality Review (CEQR) Technical Manual*, neighborhood character is an amalgam of various elements that give a neighborhood its distinct "personality." These elements may include a neighborhood's land use, socioeconomic, open space, historic and cultural resources, urban design and visual resources, shadows, transportation, and/or noise conditions; but not all of these elements contribute to neighborhood character in all cases. For a proposed project, a neighborhood character assessment under CEQR first identifies the defining features of the neighborhood and then evaluates whether the project has the potential to affect these defining features, either through the potential for a significant adverse impact or a combination of moderate effects in relevant technical analysis areas. Thus, to determine the effects of a proposed project on neighborhood character, the salient features of neighborhood character are considered together. According to the *CEQR Technical Manual*, neighborhood character impacts are rare, and it would be unusual that, in the absence of a significant adverse impact in any of the relevant technical areas, a combination of moderate effects to the neighborhood would result in an impact to neighborhood character. Moreover, a significant impact identified in one of the technical areas that contribute to a neighborhood's character is not automatically equivalent to a significant impact on neighborhood character, but, rather, serves as an indication that neighborhood character should be examined.

As outlined in Chapter 1, "Project Description," the Proposed Actions consist of a series of land use actions that would facilitate the redevelopment of Block 1863, Lots 5, 10, 13, and 26 (the "Development Site") with affordable and supportive housing and community facility uses. Specifically, the Proposed Project would consist of two buildings: the 193,000 gross square foot (gsf) Western Development ("Building 1," on Lots 5, 10, and 13) would comprise 1995 affordable housing units and 37,400 gsf of community facility uses (including 110 shelter beds and 6,400 gsf of other community facility uses); and the 45,000 gsf Eastern Development ("Building 2," on Lot 26) would be comprise 82 affordable housing units.

This chapter includes a preliminary assessment of neighborhood character, which was prepared in conformance with the *CEQR Technical Manual*. This chapter describes the defining features of the existing neighborhood character and considers the potential effects of the Proposed Project on these defining features. This assessment relies on the technical analyses presented in other chapters of this EIS, as well as information included in the *West 108th Street WSFSSH Development EAS*.

B. PRINCIPAL CONCLUSIONS

The Manhattan Valley neighborhood (within which the Project Area is located) is characterized by the diversity of its urban design and socioeconomic makeup, as well as its proximity to significant public assets, including open space, public transportation, and public institutions. As described elsewhere in this EIS and/or in the *West 108th Street WSFSSH Development EAS*, the Proposed Project would not result in significant adverse impacts in the areas that contribute to neighborhood character, as defined in the *CEQR*

Technical Manual (land use, zoning, and public policy; socioeconomic conditions; open space; shadows; historic and cultural resources; urban design and visual resources; transportation; and noise), nor would a combination of moderately adverse effects affect such a defining feature.

The Proposed Project would provide much needed affordable housing (including supportive housing for older adults) and transitional housing for older adults and optimize the use of large underbuilt City-owned sites located in close proximity to public transportation. The proposed uses would be consistent with uses that characterize the Manhattan Valley neighborhood, which is predominantly occupied by residential buildings (comprising approximately half of the study area lots) and public facilities/institutions (comprising approximately 20 percent of the study area lots). By introducing a considerable amount of affordable housing, the Proposed Project would also help to support the economic diversity that characterizes the surrounding neighborhood today. While the Proposed Project would alter the urban design of the Development Site, with the construction of two new buildings on underbuilt lots, the buildings would complement the established character of the surrounding area and improve the streetscape of West 108th Street. The Proposed Project buildings' continuous streetwall base and the varying heights of the building volumes (ranging from six to nine stories at the lot line, and rising to 11 stories after a set back from the base) would complement the current variety of building heights in the area. In addition, once in operation, the Proposed Project would not notably alter noise levels or open space ratios in the surrounding study area. While the Proposed Project would displace three existing public parking garages, resulting in a parking shortfall in the parking study area during the weekday midday and overnight periods, the Manhattan Valley neighborhood is, in part, defined by its excellent transit access, and the loss of these parking spaces would not correlate to a significant adverse impact on neighborhood character.

C. METHODOLOGY

According to the *CEQR Technical Manual*, an assessment of neighborhood character is generally needed when a proposed project has the potential to result in significant adverse impacts in any of the following technical areas: land use, socioeconomic conditions, open space, historic and cultural resources, urban design and visual resources, shadows, transportation, or noise. The *CEQR Technical Manual* states that, even if a proposed project does not have the potential to result in a significant adverse impact in any specific technical area(s), an assessment of neighborhood character may be required if the project would result in a combination of moderate effects to several elements that may cumulatively affect neighborhood character. A "moderate" effect is generally defined as an effect considered reasonably close to the significant adverse impact threshold for a particular technical analysis area.

A preliminary assessment of neighborhood character determines whether changes expected in other technical analysis areas may affect a defining feature of neighborhood character. The key elements that define neighborhood character and their relationships to one another form the basis of determining impact significance; in general, the more uniform and consistent the existing neighborhood context, the more sensitive it is to change. A neighborhood that has a more varied context is typically able to tolerate greater change without experiencing significant impacts. If there is no potential for a proposed project to affect the defining features of neighborhood character, a detailed assessment is not warranted.

Study Area

According to the *CEQR Technical Manual*, the study area for a preliminary assessment of neighborhood character is typically consistent with the study areas in the relevant technical areas assessed under CEQR

that contribute to the defining features of the neighborhood. Therefore, the study area for this analysis is the same as that used for the analysis of land use, zoning, and public policy, which extends a ¼-mile from the Project Area’s boundaries. The study area is generally bounded by lots fronting West 113th Street to the north, Central Park to the east, West 103rd Street to the south, and midblock between Riverside Drive and West End Avenue to the west.

D. PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

Defining Features

The Project Area is located within the Manhattan Valley neighborhood of Manhattan Community District (CD) 7. Manhattan Valley, which generally extends from West 96th Street to West 110th Street between Broadway and Central Park West, is a smaller neighborhood within the borough’s larger Upper West Side. The Manhattan Valley neighborhood is characterized by the diversity of its urban design and socioeconomic makeup, as well as its proximity to significant public assets, including open space, public transportation, and public institutions.

As presented in Chapter 2, “Land Use, Zoning, and Public Policy,” and Chapter 5, “Urban Design and Visual Resources,” Manhattan Valley has a wide range of housing options, ranging from five- to eight-story walkup apartment buildings with ground floor retail along the north-south avenues, a mix of brownstone townhouses in the neighborhood’s eastern section, and a number of prewar high-rise elevator apartment buildings and New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) developments to the south of the Project Area, which were constructed in the 1950s and 1960s and create large superblocks. Commercial uses, including ground floor retail space in mixed-use buildings, are generally located along the north-south avenues in the study area. There are also a number of public facilities and institutions located in the neighborhood, which represent approximately half of the study area built floor area. Institutional uses present in the study area range from smaller institutions/organizations, to mid-sized post offices and public schools, and to larger facilities, including the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and Mount Sinai – St. Luke’s Hospital (both located on superblocks to the north of the Project Area).

Residents of the Manhattan Valley represent a microcosm of the greater City, with a mix of socioeconomic groups, age, and ethnicities present. As presented in the *West 108th Street WSFSSH Development EAS*, the median household income for the ¼-mile study area is approximately \$65,074 in 2016 dollars, which is less than the median household income for the borough (\$72,008 in 2016 dollars, based on 2011-2015 Five-Year American Community Survey (ACS) data). There are also a significant number of rent-regulated units in the neighborhood, including, as noted above, several NYCHA developments. However, housing prices—while still lower than other parts of the Upper West Side—have been increasing substantially in recent years, threatening the neighborhood’s economic diversity.

A significant asset of the Manhattan Valley neighborhood is its location relative to multiple significant open space resources, including Morningside Park to the north, Central Park to the east, and Riverside Park to the west. In addition to these larger destination open space resources, the study area includes several smaller open spaces, including the Anibal Aviles and Booker T. Washington playgrounds, and a number of community gardens. In total, there are over 100 acres of publicly accessible open space located within a ½-mile radius of the Project Area (refer to Chapter 3, “Open Space”).

As presented in Chapter 5, there are several historic buildings and districts designated by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) and/or listed on the State and National Registers of

Historic Places (S/NR) in the study area. The western section of the study area encompasses a portion of the LPC-designated Riverside-West End and Morningside Heights Historic Districts. While these historic districts are notable features of the greater Manhattan Valley neighborhood, they represent one component of the diverse urban design character of the neighborhood, which ranges from three- to four-story townhouses built to the lot line to 17- to 20-story, setback tower-in-the-park buildings of the NYCHA Douglass I and II complexes, occupying full blocks.

As presented in Chapter 7, “Transportation,” while there are currently three public parking garages located on the Development Site, the study area does not exhibit high auto utilization, with the majority of study area residents traveling to work by public transportation. Specifically, based on 2011-2015 ACS Journey to Work data, approximately 75 percent of area residents travel to work by public transit, with only eight percent driving to work. Public transportation options in the Manhattan Valley neighborhood include the 1/2/3 subway lines along Broadway, the A/C and B/D subway lines along Central Park West, and several New York City Transit (NYCT) bus routes, including the M7 and M11 along Amsterdam and Columbus avenues, the M116 along West 106th Street, the M4 along Cathedral Parkway (West 110th Street), and the M60 Select Bus Service (SBS) along Broadway.

Noise is not a defining feature of the Manhattan Valley neighborhood. Noise levels in the area are generally attributable to the level of vehicular traffic, with lower ambient noise levels on less-trafficked side streets, and relatively higher noise levels along the more heavily trafficked north-south corridors of the study area. Given the presence of multiple open spaces in the study area, including several schoolyards, playgrounds are also a noise generator, although their influence on ambient noise levels are limited to locations in proximity to these facilities.

Assessment of the Potential to Affect the Defining Features of the Neighborhood

The sections below discuss potential changes resulting from the Proposed Project in the following technical areas that are considered in the neighborhood character assessment pursuant to the *CEQR Technical Manual*: land use, zoning, and public policy; socioeconomic conditions; open space; historic and cultural resources; urban design and visual resources; shadows; transportation; and noise. The assessment uses the findings from the respective chapters of this EIS, as well as the *West 108th Street WSFSSH Development EAS*, to identify whether the Proposed Project would result in any significant adverse impacts or moderate adverse effects in these technical areas and whether any such changes would have the potential to affect the defining features of neighborhood character. As described below, defining features of the study area neighborhood would not be affected either through the potential of any significant adverse impacts or a combination of moderate effects in these technical areas.

Land Use, Zoning, and Public Policy

Defining features of the neighborhood would not be adversely affected due to potential effects of the Proposed Project on land use, zoning, and public policy, either singularly or in combination with potential impacts in other relevant technical areas discussed in this section. As described in Chapter 2, “Land Use, Zoning, and Public Policy,” no significant adverse impacts related to land use, zoning, or public policy would occur in the future with the Proposed Project. Overall, the Proposed Project would provide much needed affordable housing (including supportive housing for older adults) and transitional housing for older adults and optimize the use of large underbuilt City-owned sites located in close proximity to public transportation. The proposed uses would be consistent with uses that characterize the Manhattan Valley neighborhood, which is predominantly occupied by residential buildings (comprising approximately 50

percent of the study area lots) and public facilities/institutions (comprising approximately 20 percent of the study area lots).

Socioeconomic Conditions

Defining features of the neighborhood would not be adversely affected due to potential effects of the Proposed Project on socioeconomic conditions, either singularly or in combination with potential impacts in other relevant technical areas discussed in this section. As discussed in the *West 108th Street WSFSSH Development EAS*, the Proposed Project would not result in significant adverse socioeconomic impacts. While the Proposed Project would displace three public parking garages, the garages are predominantly used for long-term vehicle storage and non-work day trips (as discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7, “Transportation”). As such, the displacement of these parking garages is not expected to significantly impact the economic activities of area residents or businesses in a manner that would alter the character of the neighborhood. In addition, and as noted above, the Manhattan Valley neighborhood is, in part, defined by its economic diversity, with median household income levels and housing costs generally lower than in other areas of the Upper West Side; however, this diversity has been threatened in recent years with the rise of housing costs in the neighborhood. By introducing a considerable amount of affordable housing, the Proposed Project would help to maintain the economic diversity that characterizes the greater neighborhood today.

Open Space

Defining features of the neighborhood would not be adversely affected due to potential effects of the Proposed Project on publicly accessible open space, either singularly or in combination with potential impacts in other relevant technical areas discussed in this section. As described in Chapter 3, “Open Space,” the Proposed Project would not result in a significant adverse impact on open space. Open space is a defining feature of the Manhattan Valley neighborhood today, due to the presence of multiple destination open spaces in the area, in addition to smaller neighborhood-serving open spaces, and the neighborhood would continue to be defined, in part, by this open space access in the future with the Proposed Project. The Proposed Project would not result in a significant reduction in the study area’s open space ratio, nor would the Proposed Project result in a direct impact on area open space. Furthermore, the Proposed Project would improve the utility of Anibal Aviles Playground (located within the Project Area, adjacent to the Development Site), as the Proposed Project’s Building 1 would include restrooms that would be accessible to users of this open space resource.

Shadows

Defining features of the neighborhood would not be adversely affected due to potential shadow effects of the Proposed Project, either singularly or in combination with potential impacts in other relevant technical areas discussed in this section. As discussed in Chapter 4, “Shadows,” the Proposed Project would result in incremental shadow coverage on two open space resources: Anibal Aviles Playground and Booker T. Washington Playground. These project-generated shadows would not affect the utilization or enjoyment of the playgrounds, and vegetation present in these open spaces would continue to receive a minimum of four to six hours of direct sunlight throughout the growing season. As such, the shadows cast on these open space resources would not result in a significant adverse impact on neighborhood character.

Historic and Cultural Resources

Defining features of the neighborhood would not be adversely affected due to potential effects of the Proposed Project on historic and cultural resources, either singularly or in combination with potential

impacts in other relevant technical areas discussed in this section. As noted above, while historic architectural resources are not defining features of the study area's neighborhood character, there are several designated historic districts and historic landmarks within the study area. As discussed in the *West 108th Street WSFSSH Development EAS*, the Proposed Project would not result in significant adverse impacts on historic and cultural resources. There are no historic resources located within the Project Area, nor would the Proposed Project result in significant adverse historic resources impacts during construction, as there are no historic resources located within 90 feet of the Project Area.

Urban Design and Visual Resources

Defining features of the neighborhood would not be adversely affected due to potential effects of the Proposed Project on urban design and visual resources, either singularly or in combination with potential impacts in other relevant technical areas discussed in this section. As described in Chapter 5, "Urban Design and Visual Resources," the Proposed Project would not result in significant adverse impacts on urban design or visual resources. While the Proposed Project would alter the urban design of the Development Site, with the construction of two new buildings on underbuilt lots, the buildings would complement the established character of the surrounding area and improve the streetscape of West 108th Street. The Proposed Project buildings' continuous streetwall base and the varying heights of the building volumes set back from the base would complement the current variety of building heights in the area.

Transportation

Defining features of the neighborhood would not be adversely affected due to potential effects of the Proposed Project on transportation, either singularly or in combination with potential impacts in other relevant technical areas discussed in this section. As described in Chapter 7, "Transportation," the Proposed Project would not result in significant adverse impacts on transportation. While the Proposed Project would displace three existing public parking garages, resulting in parking shortfalls during the weekday midday and overnight periods, as the Manhattan Valley is a transit accessible community with an auto mode share of only eight percent, the parking shortfall would not significantly affect daily commuting patterns, nor would it impede residents from performing essential tasks. Given the transit-rich character of the Manhattan Valley neighborhood, the loss of these parking spaces would not correlate to a significant adverse impact on neighborhood character.

Noise

Defining features of the neighborhood would not be adversely affected due to potential noise effects of the Proposed Project, either singularly or in combination with potential impacts in other relevant technical areas discussed in this section. As described in Chapter 9, "Noise," the Proposed Project would not result in significant adverse noise impacts. In addition, as noted above, noise is not a defining character of the Manhattan Valley neighborhood. Compared to the No-Action condition, noise levels would decrease slightly during the weekday PM peak hour (by 0.03 to 0.04 dBA), with minor increases anticipated in the weekday AM and midday peak hours (0.09 to 0.11 and 0.141 to 0.1924, respectively). With-Action noise levels would remain in the "Marginally Acceptable" CEQR noise exposure category, as under existing conditions.