



CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD No. 4

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J. LEE COMPTON
Chair

ANTHONY M. BORELLI
District Manager

January 5, 2006

Hon. Amanda M. Burden
Chair
City Planning Commission
22 Reade Street
New York, NY 10007-1216

Hon. Robert Tierney
Chair
Landmarks Preservation Commission
One Center Street, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10007

Re: General Theological Seminary development in the Chelsea Historic District

Dear Chair Burden and Chair Tierney:

Manhattan Community Board No. 4 has been informed of the plans of the General Theological Seminary (the Seminary) to erect a 17 story building at its site in the Chelsea Historic District in conjunction with the Brodsky Organization. This building will cover the block front of Ninth Avenue, between 20th and 21st streets. Four stories are to be a replacement of the present building (Sherrill Hall) for the Seminary's use, and 13 stories are to be a private co-op consisting of 82 apartments.

Although there is not yet anything formally before our Board, the importance of the issue and the concerns of the community compel us to issue this preliminary statement on the matter. The Board represents the entire community – residents, businesses, and institutions – and recognizes the difficulty in this case of reconciling diverging interests and concerns.

On November 21st, Community Board 4 hosted a widely attended public meeting at which the Seminary presented its proposals, and members of the Board and community asked questions of the seminary. Proponents and opponents then expressed their opinions about the project.

The contentions of the Seminary can be outlined as follows:

- The present Ninth Avenue building, built in 1959, was not a contributing building to the Chelsea Historic District in which it is located, was in poor physical condition, and that it was not feasible to repair it in such a way that it would serve the Seminary's needs.

- Many of the historic buildings in the seminary close were also in poor condition and badly needed rehabilitation.
- The seminary lacked the necessary funds to address these problems. The agreement with the Brodsky Organization would result in a needed new building and a very necessary infusion of cash.
- The design would preserve the integrity of the perimeter wall of the Seminary close, would not reduce the open space in the close, and would do minimal damage to the historic area.

Speakers in favor, largely associated with the Seminary, emphasized the historic importance of the Seminary in Chelsea and supported the proposal.

Some of the contentions of the community objectors were:

- City Planning's ceiling of 7 ½ stories for the Chelsea Historic District would be violated to the detriment of the District and to its neighbors.
- Any building higher than 7 ½ stories would create a precedent for other developers who want to come into Chelsea.
- The 12 story glass structure atop the five story brick and granite base would conflict as to materials used and as to scale with the rest of the Seminary and with its neighbors and was thus inappropriate in the Historic District.
- The condition of the Seminary's finances is not as serious as stated and the information so far available from the Seminary does not convincingly justify this proposal. The Seminary should provide more information on financing and engineering realities.
- The condition of Sherrill Hall is not as serious as stated and should be reviewed by an independent engineer.
- The proposal will not provide sufficient funds for the Seminary to repair and maintain its other deteriorated buildings while providing major profits for the developer.
- There are alternative construction possibilities that would raise needed funds but do less damage to the Historic District.

The Seminary has been part of the neighborhood since its beginning and the Board hopes it will remain. The Board is pleased that additional means of raising needed income were suggested at the meeting and that the Seminary said it would examine their practicality.

The proper functioning of the Board demands that any formal decision on this project be based on more information than has currently been made available to it and the community. Among the needed data are current and projected Seminary finances, especially how the costs of repairing and maintaining the existing historic buildings are to be funded; how the revenue stream from the project is to be divided among the parties; detailed rehabilitation cost

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projections; pro forma cost and income data on buildings of various size and height; additional engineering data on Sherrill Hall, etc. We trust that the City agencies involved will seek this information to use in their deliberations and that it will be available to the Board if and when the matter is brought to us formally.

We are gratified that City Landmarks and City Planning have been the community's partners in creating the Historic District and the low rise zoning necessary to protect it from the current onslaught by developers. We are very appreciative that this year City Planning, as part of the West Chelsea Plan, agreed to limit buildings on the west side of 10th Avenue, across from the Historic District, to a height no greater than eight stories. The Board is very seriously concerned about maintaining the 75-foot height restrictions of the Chelsea Plan in the Historic District, and that the built form of the Chelsea community and the integrity of the Historic District and its heart, the General Theological Seminary block, remain intact.

Community Board 4 is interested not only in the buildings that make up Chelsea, but also in the wonderful heterogeneity of the people who live here. We are deeply concerned that this proposal will, if successful, form a dangerous precedent and contribute to the reduction of the rich diversity of the community.

Sincerely,



J. Lee Compton

Chair

Manhattan Community Board No. 4



Edward S. Kirkland

Co-Chair

Chelsea Preservation & Planning Committee



Walter Mankoff

Co-Chair

Chelsea Preservation & Planning Committee

This letter was passed at Manhattan Community Board No. 4's January 4, 2006 full board meeting.

cc: Hon. Michael Bloomberg, Mayor
Hon. Scott Stringer, Manhattan Borough President
Local elected officials
General Theological Seminary
Brotsky Organization