4.0 Neighborhood Character

A. INTRODUCTION

The *CEQR Technical Manual* defines "Neighborhood Character" as an amalgam of various elements—land use, urban design features, visual and historic resources, socioeconomic conditions, and traffic and noise conditions—that define the distinct "personality" of a neighborhood. An assessment of neighborhood character is generally appropriate when an action is likely to result in a change to these physical and environmental attributes. As discussed in the *CEQR Technical Manual*, a significant adverse impact on neighborhood character may occur if one of the defining features of neighborhood character would be significantly affected, or when there are moderate impacts on a number of defining features that cumulatively may result in a significant adverse impact on neighborhood character. As noted elsewhere in this FEIS, the Proposed Action would not result in significant adverse impacts related to land use, socioeconomic conditions, historic resources, urban design and visual resources, or noise, and only easily mitigated impacts related to traffic, transit, and pedestrian conditions. In addition, the positive changes to land use and urban design, in particular, support the conclusion that the Proposed Action would result in no significant adverse impacts to neighborhood character; rather, the character of the neighborhood surrounding the Project Site would be substantially improved with the Proposed Action.

The Proposed Action would introduce new land uses along a portion of the Long Island City waterfront that has been historically characterized by industrial waterfront activities, underutilized properties, and limited public waterfront access. As a result of the Proposed Action, the urban design and visual quality of the waterfront and inland areas would also change: three high-rise towers, nearly twice the height of the nearby Queensboro Bridge would be introduced; and identified visual corridors to the waterfront would be created and enhanced by new public access to the waterfront. The new on-site uses would change traffic patterns and, to some extent, associated noise levels in the area. The effect of the Proposed Action would also be reflected in changes to socioeconomic conditions, as a new residential population would be introduced along with a larger, more varied worker population to support the expansion of film and television production facilities and the establishment of other new commercial enterprises (see Chapter 3, "Socioeconomic Conditions").

The proposed improvements reflect an ongoing, fundamental shift in the type and magnitude of waterfront development in Long Island City. In all, Silvercup West would set the groundwork for a thriving twenty-four hour neighborhood, in place of underutilized and unattractive industrial properties. Its built form would prominently announce Long Island City as a dynamic and important New York City neighborhood with its own history, unique strengths, and sense of place.

As recommended by the *CEQR Technical Manual*, the study area for the analysis of neighborhood character extends within a ½-mile radius from the Project Site, and the assessment takes into account potential effects assessed in the land use, urban design, visual resources, historic resources, socioeconomic conditions, and traffic and noise analyses (Figure 4-1). The boundaries of the Study Area extend north to about 37th Avenue and south to 46th Road, and west to include the East River and Roosevelt Island (to fully incorporate the Historic Resources analysis) and east to 24th Street. Neighborhood character in the Study Area is described as it currently exists, and in 2009 with and without the Proposed Action.

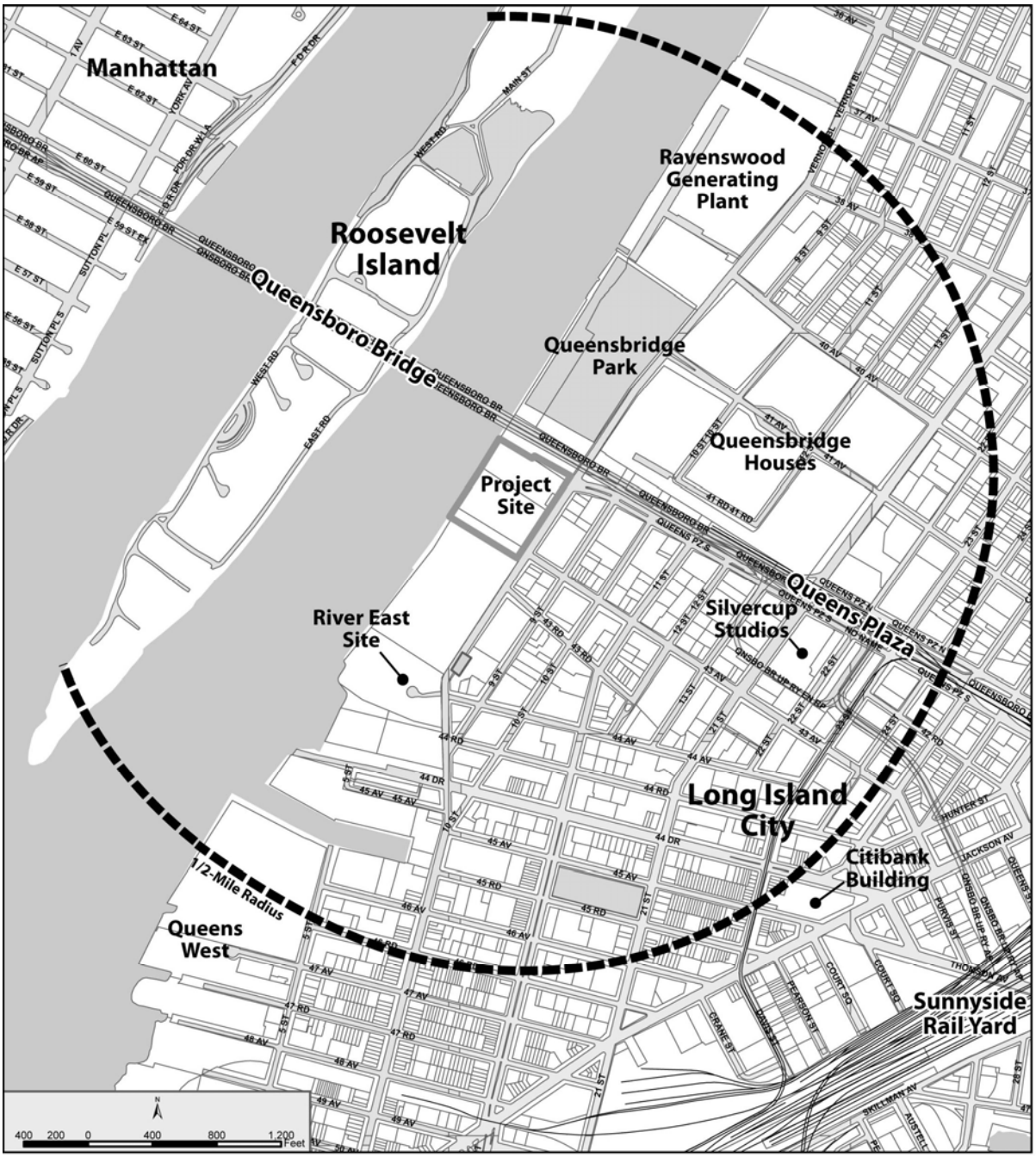

Figure 4-1:
Neighborhood Character Study Area

B. EXISTING CONDITIONS

Visible from distant locations in both Queens and Manhattan, the ornate Queensboro Bridge, with its finial-topped towers, is the most dominant physical feature of the Study Area. It marks the immediate vicinity of the Project Site. It also physically divides the Study Area into northern and southern portions, each distinct from the other in terms of neighborhood character. The Study Area south of the bridge is dominated by manufacturing uses, while the Study Area north of the bridge is dominated by Queensbridge Park and a portion of the NYCHA Queensbridge Houses complex.

Vernon Boulevard, a major traffic artery, passes along the eastern side of the Project Site and crosses beneath the Queensboro Bridge, connecting western Astoria (about 1½ miles north of the Project Site) to Hunters Point and Newtown Creek (the border between Queens and Brooklyn) about one mile south of the Project Site. The Study Area experiences heavy travel demands by daily commuters working and residing in Long Island City and commuters traveling to Manhattan. Although the Queensboro Bridge is frequently congested carrying traffic to and from Manhattan during peak traffic hours, the streets leading to and surrounding the Project Site (Vernon Boulevard, Queens Plaza South, and 43rd Avenue) are quieter and much less traveled.

The Project Site is located within Queens Community District 2, in the Hunters Point and Long Island City neighborhoods of Queens.

1. Southern Portion of the Study Area

The overall visual character of the southern portion of the Study Area is defined by the plain façades of low-scale warehouses and industrial buildings lining treeless streets. Certain elements of the built landscape are distinct, however: the relatively small, but ornate and historic New York Architectural Terra Cotta Company building located on the northern portion of the Project Site; the NYPA facility, with its prominent stacks, located on the southern portion of the Project Site; and the Queensboro Bridge stretching to great heights above the Study Area (Figure 4-2, Photo 1). The visually prominent Silvercup Studios sign to the east, along with other industrial roof-top signage, are recognizable visual landmarks of the Long Island City skyline.

As noted in the Urban Design and Visual Resources analysis, views to the waterfront through the Project Site and in the vicinity are obstructed, both by the rise in topography between Vernon Boulevard and the river and the DSNY salt storage pile located on the inaccessible portion of 43rd Avenue west of Vernon Boulevard. Likewise, the waterfront itself is generally inaccessible throughout the Study Area (see Chapter 18, "Urban Design and Visual Resources," for additional photographs illustrating the Study Area environs). The modern Con Edison training facility and its expansive parking lot and service buildings extend between Vernon Boulevard and the East River south of 43rd Avenue. Even with this major facility, the waterfront area south of the Queensboro Bridge, including the Project Site, is generally less developed than inland areas, with ample space dedicated to materials storage. Further south along the waterfront, recent development projects have modernized and de-industrialized the character of the area. The Queens West development, along with parklands and waterfront access areas, characterizes the southernmost extent of the Queens waterfront, just beyond the southern limit of the Study Area.

Noise from bridge traffic, elevated train tracks, truck traffic on Vernon Boulevard, and operation of the NYPA facility is characteristic of the area, particularly in the vicinity of Queens Plaza South and Queens Plaza North. Noise levels from traffic along Vernon Boulevard adjacent to the Project Site are characteristic of moderately noisy urban environments (see Chapter 12, "Noise"). Other blocks in

the western portions of Long Island City are characterized by relatively low levels of noise, street activity, and traffic volumes.

Older light industrial and warehouse buildings continue to announce the substantially industrial character of the Study Area inland, while low-scale residences are located within and just beyond the Study Area, south of 44th Drive and along and east of 11th Street. A handful of such residences are also located amid a greater number of industrial uses, along 45th Avenue and 43rd Road (Figure 4-2, Photo 2). The portion of the Study Area south of Queensboro Bridge generally lacks visual interest and amenities such as street trees and benches. Few of the industrial properties are landscaped. The barren streetscapes of inland blocks are dotted with utility poles and trucks parked along curbs, at docks, and in driveways. The area is characterized by a low level of pedestrian activity. Sidewalks are generally poorly maintained (Figure 4-3, Photos 3 and 4). Vernon Boulevard, the principal traffic artery in the Study Area, is in fair condition.

The mixed use Court Square district lies at the eastern edge of the Study Area. It is centered around the (over 650 feet tall) Citibank office tower and the New York State Supreme Court House building on Jackson Avenue, and includes a mix of commercial, light industrial, and residential uses (rowhouses and apartment buildings). The Ely Avenue–Court Square station of the E, V, and G lines is an approximately 15 minute walk from the Project Site. The No. 7 Flushing line stop at Court House Square is two blocks further to the south.

Adjacent to and northwest of Court Square is Long Island City West. This 13-block subarea is characterized by light and medium industrial uses, commercial establishments, construction contractors, metal works, distribution facilities, and automotive uses. The western portion of the subarea (west of 13th Street) consists primarily of one-story buildings. A more varied mix of three- to six-story industrial loft buildings is found in the remaining portion of the subarea. The Main Lot of Silvercup Studios is located within this subarea. Silvercup Studios is the largest of the production studios that anchor the film industry in New York (see Chapter 3, "Socioeconomic Conditions"). Other businesses that supply and support Silvercup Studios and the film industry are also located in this area.

Immediately south of the Long Island City West neighborhood is Hunters Point, consisting of 25 full blocks and portions of 10 additional blocks. Most blocks feature a mix of residential and light industrial uses. This area includes the Hunters Point Historic District, which contains a full block of 1880s frame and brick rowhouses on 45th Avenue between 21st and 23rd Streets and half the west side of 23rd Street between 44th Drive and 45th Avenue.

2. Northern Portion of the Study Area

The portion of the Study Area north of the Queensboro Bridge contrasts markedly with the portion of the Study Area to the south. The Queensbridge neighborhood, although located immediately to the northwest of the Long Island City West neighborhood, is isolated from it and the Project Site due to the presence of the Queens Plaza transportation hub. The 20-acre Queensbridge Park runs along the waterfront, north of the bridge, and provides grounds for numerous mature trees and vegetative landscaping. Waterfront access is incorporated into the design of the park, but having fallen into disrepair, the waterfront area is now fenced off and inaccessible. The park includes both passive and active recreation areas, including softball fields, a playground, and benches (see Chapter 6, "Open Space"). Beyond the northern boundary of the park between 40th and 41st Avenues is the large Ravenswood power plant, which extends to the northern boundary of the Study Area.

Photo 1

Just outside the study area, the main Silvercup Studios building denotes the historic, as well as active light-industrial character of northern Hunters Point.

Photo 2

Vernon Boulevard in the southern portion of the study area features recent development, including the Con Edison training facility, shown to the left.

Figure 4-2:
Neighborhood Character – Photos 1 and 2

Photo 3

Neighborhood character of the study area is divided between the industrial district south of the Queensboro Bridge and the landscaped Queensbridge Houses and Queensbridge Park to the north (visible beneath the bridge in photo).

Photo 4

The Hunters Point industrial area is characterized by predominantly low-rise manufacturing, wholesale and warehouse buildings.

Figure 4-3:
Neighborhood Character – Photos 3 and 4

The Queensbridge Houses cover six superblocks east of Vernon Boulevard, across from Queensbridge Park. This 3,149-unit low-income housing apartment complex is comprised of 25 uniform, 6-story red-brick buildings, with dedicated, recreational open space, landscaped grounds, active sidewalks, and curvilinear paths, providing a residential community orientation set back from bordering streets. Together with Queensbridge Park, the landscaped grounds of Queensbridge Houses contribute to a park-like setting in the Study Area just north of the Queensboro Bridge. North and east of this housing complex, the Study Area is primarily industrial, though there are also a few small residential and commercial uses located to the north between 38th and 40th Avenues.

C. FUTURE CONDITIONS WITHOUT THE PROPOSED ACTION

Without the Proposed Action, the neighborhood character around the Project Site and to the north, would remain fundamentally unchanged from its current condition. South of the Project Site, however, planned new high-rise developments in and near Queens West are expected to increase the population in the larger Hunters Point community (see Figure 2-4, in Chapter 2). The character of the waterfront south of the Project Site would continue to transition from sparsely inhabited industrial areas to more mixed use development. New development east of the Project Site would likewise strengthen the business core around Queens Plaza and Court Square.

The NYPA facility currently located on the southern portion of the Project Site would be removed by 2009, though the DSNY salt storage pile would remain on the mapped but unopened segment of 43rd Avenue. Views to the waterfront through the Project Site would remain obstructed, and there would be no public waterfront access in the immediate vicinity. The relocation of the NYPA facility would remove a source of community noise, however. The renovated historic New York Architectural Terra Cotta Company building, the only change to historic resources in the Study Area, would improve the appearance of the Vernon Boulevard Streetscape.

Considerable new development is expected to occur in the vicinity of Queens Plaza and the Hunters Point waterfront by 2009. Over two million square feet of commercial development from four projects and more than four million square feet of residential development from four additional projects are anticipated to be completed by 2009. This would augment and strengthen the office/commercial Queens Plaza and Court Square subdistricts of Long Island City, consistent with City plans and policy (see Chapter 2, "Land Use, Zoning, and Public Policy"). The approximately 4 million square feet of residential development at Queens West and River East would advance the goals of transforming a portion of the Long Island City waterfront into a new residential community. Most of the residential development is planned for Queens West and River East, just south of the Project Site along the waterfront, while the commercial development is anticipated to occur throughout the Study Area.

Given the status of the established Queensbridge Park and Queensbridge Houses, the portion of the Study Area north of the Project Site is expected to experience little change in neighborhood character by 2009, aside from the restoration of public access to the waterfront esplanade in Queensbridge Park, which would be complete by that year.

D. FUTURE CONDITIONS WITH THE PROPOSED ACTION

The Proposed Action would result in no significant adverse impacts to neighborhood character. The traffic, transit, and pedestrian impacts identified would be fully mitigated through standard engineering practices and would therefore result in no significant adverse impacts to neighborhood character. Analyses indicate that there would be no significant adverse noise impacts that would affect neighborhood character. Likewise, other analyses indicate no significant adverse impacts would result to attributes that define neighborhood character, including land use, socioeconomic conditions, or historic resources, or urban design and visual resources.

Rather, the Proposed Action would improve the neighborhood character in this portion of Long Island City in several important and fundamental ways. The Proposed Action would improve urban design and visual quality and transform a partially vacant industrial site into a vital component of the developing Long Island City waterfront, connecting the waterfront development south of the Project Site to neighborhoods inland. The Proposed Action would eliminate the DSNY salt pile, would introduce new elements to improve the composition of land uses and built forms south of the bridge, and would also provide new employment and recreational opportunities for area residents. The Project would improve access to the waterfront and support efforts to provide a continuous promenade along the East River. There would be an increase in workers and residents that would enliven the area. Its new public open spaces, public waterfront access, and potential for accessibility to Queensbridge Park would further serve to increase activity levels. Silvercup West would also introduce a new space for cultural facilities and new retail shops to be enjoyed by both the new and existing residents of Long Island City.

The Proposed Action would transform underutilized waterfront industrial land into a mix of uses, each responding to the market demand of the unique Long Island City location and existing industrial and residential communities surrounding it. The mix of residential, commercial, studio, and cultural/community facility uses, and new public open space that would be introduced by the Proposed Action, would further the successful integration of the Project Site with the surrounding Long Island City community (see Chapter 2, "Land Use, Zoning, and Public Policy"). Consistent with recent development trends in the area, the Proposed Action would improve underutilized, formerly industrial property along the waterfront and result in no significant adverse land use impacts. Likewise, no significant adverse impacts to zoning would result from the Proposed Action. A zoning change and other related actions, which are included as part of the Proposed Action, would allow for the redevelopment of this dormant and underutilized waterfront location, and would be supportive of the City's long-term vision for the East River waterfront as a vital mixed use community.

As demonstrated in the socioeconomic analysis (see Chapter 3 "Socioeconomic Conditions"), the Proposed Action would not result in any significant adverse socioeconomic impacts as defined in the *CEQR Technical Manual*. Instead, it is anticipated that it would result in economic benefits to the Borough of Queens and to New York City as a whole. It would introduce new residents, new commercial and retail space, new film and television production space, and other uses to the Project Site. Direct residential, business, or institutional displacements would not result from the Proposed Action; likewise, the Proposed Action would result in no indirect residential displacement and no adverse effects on specific industries. Detailed assessments concluded that the Proposed Action would result in no indirect residential, business or institutional displacement.

The Proposed Action would also not result in any significant adverse impacts to historic resources on the Project Site or in the Study Area (see Chapter 8, "Historic Resources"). The largely vacant Project Site includes the two and one-half story former New York Architectural Terra Cotta Company's main office building, and is immediately adjacent to the 354-foot-tall Queensboro Bridge,

both of which are designated historic resources. There are also several other historic properties (designated or eligible for designation) within ½ mile of the Project Site. The Proposed Action would create a lively mix of uses and public open spaces that would attract people to the site and display the New York Architectural Terra Cotta Company building for the public to appreciate as never before. Likewise, the Proposed Action would provide new opportunities for visitors to view the Queensboro Bridge from the proposed outdoor plazas, Esplanade, and rooftop terrace.

No significant adverse impacts to urban design or visual resources would result from the Proposed Action (see Chapter 18, "Urban Design and Visual Resources"). The Proposed Action would establish a greater formal connection between developing inland areas, including the Citibank building and the waterfront; it would also continue the type of waterfront development initiated by Queens West and furthered by the River East development. Thus, the Proposed Action would contribute to a consistency of building bulk, type, and arrangement typical of similar recent development in Long Island City. The Proposed Action would also introduce new opportunities for the public to appreciate many attractive features of the Project Site environs, both by providing public open space that takes advantage of the Project Site's location on the East River and proximity to the Queensboro Bridge and New York Architectural Terra Cotta Company building and also by providing a mix of uses that would maintain a 24-hour community of residents, workers, and visitors. The mapped but inaccessible extension of 43rd Avenue between Vernon Boulevard and the river would be opened, the salt pile removed, new open space provided, and the visual corridor designated there developed.

The Project Site vicinity experiences heavy travel demands by daily commuters working and residing in Long Island City and commuters traveling to Manhattan (see Chapter 9, "Traffic and Parking"). However, many sections of the local street network that serve the site have substantial amounts of unused capacity. These streets include Vernon Boulevard, Queens Plaza South, and 43rd Avenue, all of which lead directly to the Project Site. Significant adverse traffic impacts would occur at several intersections. The evaluation of mitigation measures, however, indicates that all significant adverse impacts would be fully mitigated by standard traffic engineering improvements such as the installation of traffic signals, signal timing and phasing modifications, parking prohibitions, and lane restriping. The analysis of parking conditions indicates that sufficient parking would be provided to accommodate the proposed project's expected parking demands. Therefore, there would be no significant adverse traffic- or parking-related impacts that would affect neighborhood character.

One significant adverse impact to transit and two significant adverse impacts to pedestrian crossings were identified, but all would be mitigatable and not affect neighborhood character (see Chapter 10, "Transit and Pedestrians"). The Q103 bus would experience a significant adverse impact during the AM and PM peak hours. This impact, however, would be mitigated by the addition of two northbound buses during the AM peak hour and one southbound bus during the PM peak hour. It is MTA NYCT's general policy to provide additional bus service where demand warrants.

The pedestrian crossing locations across Vernon Boulevard at Queens Plaza South and 43rd Avenue, which are most proximate to the Proposed Action, would also experience significant adverse impacts. Installing traffic signals at both intersections, however, would fully mitigate these impacts.

There would be no significant adverse transit or pedestrian impacts that would affect neighborhood character with these mitigation measures in place.

Analyses of potential noise impacts (see Chapter 12, "Noise") indicate that no significant adverse impacts would result with the Proposed Project, either related to the introduction of new mobile and stationary noise sources or related to the introduction of new sensitive receptors into the Project Site.

The results of this analysis indicate that noise levels at all new sensitive sites would not require more than the 35 dBA window/wall attenuation required for a Special Mixed Use District (123-32-ZRNY) to achieve acceptable interior noise levels. Because Section 123-22 only applies to residences, an (E) Designation will be mapped on the Project Site requiring that adequate noise attenuation would also be provided for commercial uses. No significant adverse impact would therefore occur, and there would be no need for additional attenuation at these sites.

In the Future with the Proposed Action, stationary noise sources including HVAC and associated mechanical equipment would be designed and operated to satisfy the requirements of CEQR and the New York City Noise Control Code. The NYC Noise Control Code Section 24-227 requires that circulation devices be designed as not to create an interior noise level of greater than 45 dBA and as not to increase ambient noise above daytime and nighttime standards as set forth in the Code. This will ensure that all relevant criteria for noise are met and that no significant adverse impact would occur. Therefore, there would be no significant adverse noise-related impacts that would affect neighborhood character.

E. VARIATIONS

Each of the three variations, like the Preferred Development Program, provides for the expansion of Silvercup Studios, part of the economic base of the Study Area. Each would enliven the waterfront site with new uses and open space. Though different from the Preferred Development Program in the number of residents and the programming of commercial and studio space, the variations would result in similarly positive improvements to the neighborhood character of the area. As with the Preferred Development Program, the variations would result in no significant adverse impacts to neighborhood character.

Technical analyses related to traffic and transit indicate that all significant adverse impacts would be mitigated through standard means. There would be no significant adverse impacts to noise, based on that analysis, which relies on predicting worst-case conditions. Therefore, as with the Preferred Development Program, no significant adverse impacts to neighborhood character would result related to traffic, transportation, or noise for the three variations.

The variations, which compared to the Preferred Development Program would entail similar mixes though different balances of uses, would be subject to the same Restrictive Declaration as the Preferred Development Program and constructed within the same building envelope. The variations, like the Preferred Development Program, therefore, would result in no significant adverse impacts to land use or zoning and would be consistent with public policies. Similarly, though the variations would differ from the Preferred Development Program in terms of programmed uses, they would result in no significant adverse impacts to socioeconomic conditions. The film and television production space provided in the Preferred Development Program and each of the variations would enhance the competitiveness of this industry in New York City. Significant adverse impacts to community facilities would not result, and the protection and enhancement of historic resources would be similar to the Preferred Development Program. Waterfront open space and public amenities would also be the same. Traffic impacts would be fully mitigated through standard means. Therefore, as with the Preferred Development Program, there would be no significant adverse impacts to neighborhood character with any of the variations.