

Draft Minutes
Chinatown Working Group meeting
1/4/21, 6:30pm, zoom

Present: Harry Bubbins (Village Preservation), Briar Winters (NMASS), Kaiyu Li (UIC), Shelly Silver (Chinatown resident, No organization), Rob Hollander (Friend of CWG), Vanessa Thill (Art Against Displacement), Zishun Ning (CSWA/YAD), Michael Robinson Cohen (Citygroup), Steph Kranes (NMASS/YAD), John Mongrella (No affiliation, Friend of Chinatown), Tom LaGatta (Downtown Independent Democrats), Francisca Benitez (Art Against Displacement), Michael Francoeur (Downtown Independent Dems), Grace Lee (Children First and Seaport Coalition)

Also attending: Dean Moses (AM New York Metro), Lindsey Boylan (Manhattan Borough President candidate)

Facilitating: Rob
Notetaking: Vanessa

Proposed Agenda:
Update from Citywide Coalition Rally
Soho Noho Rezoning
No Towers Lawsuit
Marte Campaign

Rob: Minutes from last month are approved with no objections.

Update from Citywide Coalition Rally

Vanessa: There was a great rally in mid-December with different speakers from development fights from different neighborhoods. Zishun spoke well representing us. The group will continue to meet on Fridays 11-1 to continue to organize together and support each other. There was one thing to flag as far as an outcome: there was a lot of negative feedback from YIMBYs on Twitter specifically targeting Sunrise Movement for signing on to the letter, which opposes the De Blasio Soho Noho Rezoning since it calls for a moratorium on all developer-driven rezonings.

Rob: What was the issue?

Vanessa: Basically these market urbanist types, who we suspect some may be paid by developers to be so vocal online, were trying to argue that we were against affordable housing, and that we are segregationist. It does become problematic with some of the more preservationist arguments about the neighborhood that we come across as conservative. But it's a manipulation of

reality since we are obviously pro-affordable and the Soho alternative plan proves that. Youth Against Displacement put out a great zine/graphic on Twitter and IG that breaks this down.

Zishun: Deblasio has been called out for racist rezonings targeting communities of color. So he's saying, if you criticize me for displacing people of color, now I'm going to displace white people. When we had the citywide rally, and Soho is only one part of that, but these people online tried to take our message out of context to divide our unity. We say that that's how they try to divide us, even in Soho there is still affordable housing that exists already there. De Blasio's rezoning destroys more affordable housing than it creates. It displaces the communities there. Soho came out with their own alternative plan. If people really support affordable housing, they should support what the community has proposed. It shows that the attackers actually have no interest in affordable housing. They are saying, you shouldn't displace our community you should displace someone else. Two sides are supporting the same agenda, one is advocating displacement, one is saying displace others, don't displace me. It's been interesting. I think people see more clearly now. Youth Against Displacement is really trying to set the record straight. At the rally, it was encouraging to see different groups came out, it was very cold but high spirits.

Fran: I think it was important to be there. What we thought was a missing emphasis in the letter was that we really want to be involved with the future of our city. We are interested in having community-led rezonings. All the work we have done, don't throw it in the garbage with the developer-led rezonings. It was great to show up to clarify that which was missing in the letter.

Soho Noho Rezoning

Harry: I'm the special projects director at Village Preservation. I'm open to questions and in the future could share slides. The gist is that Soho Noho is one of the targets of the real estate developers plan. From Astor Place to South Canal, to 6th/ Avenue of the Americas and on the east side, Baxter and Centre. The southeast side encompasses parts of Chinatown and would have ramifications outside the footprint. In response to that, 10 organizations came up with their own plan. The mayor says its about affordable housing, but his donors own land there, including a parking lot and property on Lafayette, they stand to profit from this upzoning. It's true that the zoning in the area hasn't been updated and doesn't allow residential at all in some areas, only manufacturing, hotels, offices. We understand residential zoning would be appropriate. But we don't want upzonings where you are getting 3-4 times the luxury units compared to affordable, some of them for 130% of AMI for the region. The community has said yes residential zoning is good and affordable housing is good. You can do that with deeper levels of affordable housing. That is the response to the mayor's plan. It's not as detailed and as crafted as the CWG as far as greater levels of nuance for different districts. We seek to show that more units could be created

without the upzoning and not having big box stores displacing small businesses. The ULURP process has not started yet but it will soon.

Fran: In the part you said was an upzoning, the existing manufacturing zoning has no height limits? So even without the rezoning could they build towers?

Harry: the gist is that the mayor's plan has different subdistricts from R9 to 10 to 9X in each instance the FAR is increasing. There will be more development allowed. Whether it is a height limit or not, it's allowing greater development through the use of the FAR that's increasing. They are increasing it in every part of the map.

Fran: There is a fundamental thing which is hard for me to oppose because when you look at the map of zoning, it's all manufacturing and it's not manufacturing there. Anything you have to do you have to ask for a zoning variance. The only thing is the affordability. I don't have other points to attack it other than that.

Harry: Our plan asks for more affordable housing than the MIH model allows and deeper than the range of AMI. We are proposing that you don't need this massive luxury upzoning to accomplish affordable housing goals.

Vanessa: Question about the timeline. Has the plan been certified?

Harry: The study phase ended in December of last year. It's expected to be certified in the near future. That will kick off the whole process. Even in presenting our community plan we are of the position that these ULURPS are also un-democratic. People cannot gather in person. City Planning is not studying the impacts of displacement. We believe community planning should be prioritized. Let's talk more.

Shelly Silver: Are you involved with the Seaport Towers?

Harry: I am not directly involved.

Fran: What constitutes a solid community engagement? It's an in depth process for sustained analysis. I wanted to point that out, I want to know more about the process of how you came up with the community plan.

Harry: There are a lot of stakeholders that represent different niches. In Soho there are people who have been there in regulated houses, artists, a lot of loft tenants, Bowery Alliance, but it was in response to the mayor's plan. We had to get together who we know who is in the neighborhood, working under some rubric or umbrella. Artists are being forced out by construction harassment. So the plan was composed quickly, it happened within a week or two. We didn't want to lose time in the details, but rather find common ground to fight back. To have the very basic agreements that we could share.

Vanessa: Congrats for pulling that together. Great organizing work.

Harry: Like you guys always say, to have something to fight for, not just against. I am here to discuss further. Hopefully people can come out to those hearings.

Rob: Do you have allies on the community board?

Harry: I would say so. On the ULURP things the fix is in, things may be approved with recommendations. We believe they will be sympathetic to our goals. Some of the orgs that signed on, some are members of the board, so we will see how it is presented in the end by the administration to the board in those narrow formats they opine on.

Tom: I'm a member of the Downtown Independent Dems. We put out a resolution on pausing and revising the administration's plan. We are interested in the community plan but made a strategic position to identify the critical issues in the plan. The city's R10 zoning through MIH is a lie. In fact based on the De Blasio plan, the city doesn't have to bring residential zoning at all. They can choose to bring office spaces. The city is incentivizing office development, they want to build a commercial corridor down Broadway from midtown down to the financial district. There's also no affordance to convert commercial real estate into residential. The city's plan is claiming to encourage affordability. But actually it just has a lot of giveaways to commercial interests. And there are so many problems with the community process on zoom meetings. The city is curating the questions and answers. You don't even realize you are in a room full of people who oppose it, because they are only selecting the Open NY people to speak. Also it's a pandemic. Any studies and statistics are in an anomalous period and not reflective of the actual reality in any meaningful sense. We are pushing a resolution for the CWG plan as well. There are a lot of similarities to what the kind of language we want to push the city. Here is the resolution:
https://www.didnyc.org/pause_and_revise_the_citys_plan_for_soho_noho

Rob: It's a long document, we can read it at our leisure.

Lindsey: Hello folks I am new to this working group meeting. Lindsey Boylan here and I'm running for manhattan borough president. I know this is a critical group to work with in the job. my email: lindsey@lindseyfornewyork.com and website www.lindseyfornewyork.com. Listening in to learn tonight.

No Towers Lawsuit

Steph: For anyone who doesn't know the Coalition to Protect Chinatown and the LES has a lawsuit against the 4 megatowers. We won that lawsuit last year. Subsequently the developers appealed it as we expected. It argues anything in

the LSRD cant block air and light, cant harm neighborhood character. The max building is 200 feet, the towers are 1,000 feet, they are violating all those rules. We built a lawsuit based on that. It requires the developers have to prove they won't violate those rules. At the same time, City Council filed a complaint not to stop the towers but to get a ULURP process. Which would give Margaret Chin voting power over the process. She said she plans to use ULURP to approve the project and throw in concessions. The lawsuit was overturned. At first they won and then it was overturned in appeal. Now there is a hearing on our lawsuit. The developers want to claim that the towers are as of right. We have been rallying the community around that fact over the last few years, a crime scene on the LES. Community, workers, residents, small businesses have been coming out against the towers. We have a hearing on Jan 27, where the appeal of our lawsuit will be heard. We are working on mobilizing people across the neighborhood. We are asking people to join a virtual rally for a show of strength against the towers and the displacement agenda. During the hearing we won't be able to be seen. The court doesn't exist in a vacuum. The judge will have seen in the press, will have seen that people are opposing the towers. The law and the people are on our side. It should be a very interesting day.

Fran: We are gonna do a press conference on MLK Day.

Zishun: We will have the virtual rally at 1pm. In the court you can't say anything or see other people. We will let the zoom stay on, we can chat in the zoom. Bring signs if you want to join. Show how much you hate these towers and hate what De Blasio is doing.

Kaiyu: Is there any link to the meeting?

Steph: We will have one soon. And will send to everyone

Fran: We have to have 2 contingency plans. We should have two banners one if we win and one if lose. This is it this is the end of the road, guys. After this, we chain ourselves to the building.

Briar: We can do another lawsuit if we lose right Steph?

Steph: Yes we would be able to.

Zishun: The judge should make a different ruling as opposed to the city council one. Before that we need to put out the public pressure all the way leading up. This is not just some obscure one that no one paid attention to.

Fran: It is important we are all on the same page at that moment. On the 27th, the spotlight can be taken to those other lawsuits, we have to be all coordinated.

Vanessa: We need to make sure this is out there on social media. We need op-eds, post flyers, we need to remind people this is happening, so everything you can do to spread the word is helpful.

Grace: Great to see everyone! I have to jump on a call to present against the towers at the Seaport. I hope that we can get your support there. Please feel free to reach out to me to get involved. gylee01@gmail.com

Briar: Thanks Grace! I will submit testimony, as well.

Marte Campaign

Briar: I had put it on the agenda in case there are updates on ways people can plug in. Can Caitlin weigh in? I know she is not here in that capacity.

Caitlin: there are a lot of ways to get involved. I sound tired but I'm excited. We are ramping up, doing tables at 2 shifts on Sunday all fall with the anti-displacement guide giving an update about the towers and Chris as he related to the Two Bridges fight. We will need to update the messaging based on the result of the lawsuit. In the short term we have been having phone banks 2x a week with members of the CWG and affiliates every Sunday 1-2 and Wednesday 6:30-7:30. Talking about the towers and the campaign. We could use more people coming out. There is a lot happening, if people have time I could plug you in.

Zishun: For everyone new here, Chris Marte is the only candidate who supports the CWG plan and our lawsuits. CWG is one of the first to endorse him. City Council election is crucial, because they have the power in land use. It will be crucial for us to push for the plan. Now because of weather and covid we paused the tabling. Now it's phone-banking, word of mouth and social media.

DID Res

Tom: Political clubs are where the elected officials are coming and grassroots channels, we want to have a better feedback loop. The resolutions we put out have good tractions. We worked with Bob and Broome St Tenants for cancel rent, eviction moratorium, we even got support from Caroline Maloney. The staffers do read through it. A number of us want DID to give a full throated endorsement of the CWG, to fully endorse and provide input and content to the elected as far as next steps. The plan was made some time ago, what needs to be finalized, updated. A zoning action group needs to be formed. We are going to meet to work on the language, my understanding is we want to bring it to a ULURP process. Whatever the next steps are for moving the CWG forward, that's what we want to say in the resolution and documenting community principles. Do you want a ULURP process?

Rob: Yes we would love to have a ULURP process. The EIS is a million dollars. The Community Board can get it cheap, DCP will do it for them. The CB has not

been together on this. Largely because the mayor said categorically no when he first arrived.

Tom: Which community boards?

Fran: 1, 2, and 3

Rob: Really it's 1 and 3. 2 took its area out of plan. There might be a block. One block north of Canal. So actually I think Fran is right, 2 is still in there.

Fran: I have a larger question of affordability. What historical examples are there that show the question of affordability is the purview of City Planning?

Rob: Isn't affordability a purview of HPD? They manage all subsidized housing. City Planning will zone for it, but what is subsidized is for HPD.

Fran: When De Blasio came up with MIH, was that the first time City Planning was dealing with affordability?

Rob: In previous Bloomberg zoning, DCP included voluntary inclusionary zoning. The voluntary part was given as a bonus, you could get an additional FAR if you include 20% of your development as affordable. That was a rider on these rezonings. There were 120 rezonings, I don't know if all of them had it, some took the bonus, some didn't you had to have a high FAR to take the bonus.

Tom: Was that a mandate of city council?

Rob: No that was a De Blasio thing. The Bloomberg way was with a bonus. The innovation of MIH was to say, it's no longer going to be voluntary, it's not mandatory, with every upzoning there will have to be at least 20% affordability.

Tom: It's just for residential.

Rob: Yeah there's not such thing as affordability for commercial. As far as I know commercial is completely exempt. It's an interesting question because MIH was targeted to residential areas. There was never the thought that if you build commercially you might have FAR, transfer of funds. That was actually part of the CWG original plan for a preservation. To preserve some, you could transfer air rights to some other place outside of Chinatown. But the community board with some justification objected to that. Where is that FAR going to go?

Zishun: Tom we can talk more in our separate meeting. The mayor and city council are the ones playing the key roles. They are both for the developers, that's why they don't like this plan. Our city council member tried to divide the plan after the mayor rejected it. We continued to put pressure because if they really side with the community then everything will move, whatever process to

approve the plan, the ULURP process. In the end we are saying that the city should side with the community.

Tom: The timing for the resolution will be Jan 27. We will push this and hope our membership agrees.

Rob: Zishun and Briar and I will work with Tom on this.

Fran: In the chat, Shelly is asking about the Seaport.

Shelly: I was curious to know more about the Seaport towers. I emailed Grace. I know people who live in the buildings across from the parking lot, who will have no light and air.

Fran: Did you send testimony?

Shelly: I am just finding out about this now.

Fran: Grace has been coming for more than a year telling us about it. There are a lot of problems with the contamination. I will share the email with you Shelly with the different talking points.

2021 Plans

Michael: There hasn't been a ton of movement with the architects, people are still working on them. We set a deadline for the middle of January to collect all of them. We are hoping to have the full scope of images for the sites we assigned. There has been a little bit of work with AAD, they had a contact for a email based exhibition space that was interested in showing some of the work, we were talking with Ryan Oskin from AAD about putting that out as a first step toward sharing the images and advocate for the plan. Once it's more organized, it is something we should talk about here just to make sure it is aligned and how the CWG wants to be represented. It got delayed because of the pandemic but we are still collecting them. Citygroup is a collective of architects located in the LES we were working on visualizations if the plan were to be passed, what buildings would look like under the tenets of the plan, so we selected sites in each zone and have illustrated what it would look like if a building was built there to provide a way to advocate for the plan that would allow people to understand zoning in a less technical way. We have a lot of images, we are trying to get one for each site so we can understand what it would look like within each zone.