

October 22, 2013

**STATEMENT OF THE NEW YORK LANDMARKS CONSERVANCY AT THE NEW YORK CITY
COUNCIL SUBCOMMITTEE ON ZONING AND FRANCHISES, REGARDING THE MIDTOWN EAST
REZONING PROPOSAL**

Good day, Chair Weprin and Councilmembers. I am Andrea Goldwyn, speaking on behalf of the New York Landmarks Conservancy. The Landmarks Conservancy is a 40-year old, private, independent, not-for-profit organization. Our mission is to preserve and protect historic resources throughout New York.

As a preservation group, the Conservancy has substantial concerns about the proposed Midtown East rezoning. We believe that this plan has the potential to gut and destroy the very character of this area, encouraging demolition of landmark quality buildings on sites that the Department of City Planning has identified as prime for development.

These buildings are an essential part of the mix that makes New York such a special place. This proposal ignores them. It also ignores that the tech firms rejuvenating the City's economy are flocking to its older buildings, in historic districts such as Chelsea and Flatiron, which feature a unique sense of place. London didn't tear down its historic architecture to build the Shard, and neither should New York.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission is reviewing a list of 32 buildings for designation. We support that list, but this area is rich with historic resources, many already eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, that should also be considered for LPC designation. The plan encompasses 70-plus blocks, so there is no reason to take down the best of its architecture, when there is ample room for new design. The rezoning is racing toward an artificial deadline, out of sync with the Landmarks Commission at exactly the time when they should be working together. The inclusion of a five-year sunrise provision is clear proof that this plan does not need to be approved now.

Our concerns regarding this sweeping proposal go beyond the landmarks issues. An unprecedented coalition of Community Boards issued a thoughtful and detailed analysis of the proposal along with their rejection, but here we are moving along toward a final vote without satisfying answers.

Why is the City cutting out the public and this Council out of a review process that has yielded new construction across the five boroughs? City Planning has stated that the rezoning will result in just a few buildings. Shouldn't this public ULURP process should be able to handle them?

The City has not offered specifics on how Grand Central and the streets of Midtown East should accommodate existing overcrowding, East Side Access, or the tens of thousands of workers at these new buildings. A handful of pedestrian plazas, which were never the top community priority, won't do it.

We agree with critics who say that the City is selling itself short by setting one price for air rights across 70 very different blocks. And we share concerns that future administrations will start to crack open the lock box in response to the demands of future budgets.

Although the plan rewards energy efficiency, it supports demolishing pre-war buildings, which have built-in efficiency measures.

As architect Robert AM Stern noted in his op-ed piece in the New York Times, "The problem with the so-called planning study is that it's not a plan. It trusts that developers will build world-class buildings, and that we'll sort out the public realm as we go."

The Conservancy agrees that change and growth are integral to New York's success, but not at the expense of the distinct historic architecture that makes the City great. We don't think that this proposal can be fixed in the short amount of time remaining in this administration. We would want to give the Landmarks Commission the time it needs to review and designate the significant buildings within the rezoning area; to see the footprint of the Special District reduced, perhaps staying the same size as the existing Grand Central Subdistrict; to see the FAR limits remain at current levels, or have a modest increase; to allow developers to purchase air rights from Grand Central Terminal before the City; and we would want to ensure that the public's voice is not eliminated as future development is contemplated.

If these measures, and the many more that the Community Board has requested cannot be met, we ask the Council to reject this plan. In today's political environment, we know that compromise is a worthy goal, but if this plan passes, it will set in stone policies that will prove detrimental to the City's future. We ask you to help clear the way towards a new vision for Midtown East that protects the best of our architectural heritage and allows the public a voice in the area's development.

The blend of new and old is what keeps New York vital and unique. The historic architecture of Midtown East should be an integral building block to its success.

Thank you for the opportunity to express The Landmarks Conservancy's views.