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**The City of New York
Community Board 8 Manhattan
Zoning and Development Committee
Thursday, March 4, 2021 - 6:30 PM
*This meeting was conducted remotely via Zoom***

Please note: The resolutions contained in the committee minutes are recommendations submitted by the committee chair to the Community Board. At the monthly full board meeting, the resolutions are discussed and voted upon by all members of Community Board 8 Manhattan.

MINUTES:

Present: Elizabeth Ashby, Co-Chair; Anthony Cohn, Co-Chair; Gayle Baron, Michele Birnbaum, Alida Camp, Saundra I. Coleman, Barbara Chocky, Billy Freeland, Craig Lader, Valerie Mason, Peter Patch, Rita Popper, Elizabeth Rose, Barbara Rudder, Barry Schneider, Marco Tamayo, Adam Wald, Elaine Walsh, and Shari Weiner

Resolutions for Approval:

Item 1 – Call to Withdraw “Planning Together” from the City Council

The meeting was called to order at 6:30.

1. “Planning Together” - Co-chair Elizabeth Ashby called on Paul Graziano, a member of the public, who introduced the “Planning Together”, a proposed ten-year comprehensive planning cycle which would impose a framework for comprehensive planning and development on New York City. The bill is currently before the City Council as Intro 2186-2020.

The proposal was launched by Speaker Cory Johnson in mid-December and introduced to the City Council one day later. The proposal was submitted without fanfare, and with no prior notice to Community Boards. A single hearing was held on February 23, with no formal notice to Community Boards or other interested parties. The main focus of the Master Plan is to increase real estate development *in every community board in NYC*. It creates a top-down administrative hierarchy that does nothing to increase neighborhood power or democratize land use, it merely empowers Mayoral appointees to make sweeping land use decisions in neighborhoods citywide. More specifically:

1. Mayor Dominated Planning Group
 - a. The Mayor’s Office, Borough President and City Council appoint a Long-Term Steering Committee (LTSC).
 - b. LTSC appoints the Borough Steering Committee (BSC) for each borough.
 - c. The Mayor appoints a “Director” for the Mayor’s Office of Long Term Planning (OLTP).
2. Top-Down Process Eliminates Community Participation
 - a. After one public hearing, the Mayor’s appointed Director would create three rezoning plans for each community board district, imposing housing targets to increase density.
 - b. There are no hearing requirements at the Community Boards who must choose one of the three plans.
 - c. There are no hearing requirements for the Borough President who must choose one of the three plans.
 - d. There are no hearing requirements for the LTSC, who must also choose one of the three plans.

- e. Their choices are then given to the City Council, and after only one hearing the Council should choose one single plan.
 - f. If the City Council does not choose any of the plans, then the Mayor's Director is empowered to choose a plan.
 - g. Local Council Member deference is eliminated.
 - h. Each Community District Plan is then incorporated into a citywide comprehensive plan, i.e. the Master Plan.
3. Once the Master Plan is in place:
- a. During the ULURP process, the Department of City Planning certifies a development plan if it "aligns" with the Master Plan.
 - b. A development plan that "aligns" with the Master Plan is assured approval.
 - c. For projects in "alignment" with the Master Plan, no environmental review is required.

For comprehensive planning to be truly democratic it cannot be decided and fast-tracked by those appointed by the Mayor. Instead, the community must be included in the formation of the proposed rezoning plans. The city lacks comprehensive planning, but the process should be improved by increasing community participation, not by excluding the people who will be the most heavily impacted.

Mr. Graziano faulted the proposal for its lack of comparable case studies. Those selected by Speaker Johnson were Seattle and Minneapolis, neither of which are anywhere near the size of New York, and both of which have sizeable areas devoted to One and Two-Family residential zoning, and neither of which have as-of-right building conditions.

Initial comments and questions were limited to Board Members, in the interest of time. The Land Use Committee of the Whole will take up this topic on March 10, with speakers scheduled from the City Council and George Janes. This meeting and presentation was intended to introduce Committee and other Board Members to the outlines of the proposal.

Many Board Members among the 65 persons present on the Zoom call asked questions and commented upon the proposed Charter Change reflected in Intro 2186-2020. The main thrust of most of the comments was the lack of Community Board involvement in the process aside from a pro forma meeting or two during the early part of the cycle. The plan, with so much authority vested in a Mayoral appointee (the Director of the Office of Long Term Planning), was likened to a return of Robert Moses. Another described a far-reaching plan at the end of much of the City Council's term-limited tenure as "chutzpah". With the removal of the guardrails of the Zoning Resolution and ULURP, any project that falls into "alignment" with the Master Plan is assured of construction. This alone could lead to spot zoning on a scale hitherto unheard of.

More than one speaker questioned the ULURP work-around, the GEIS (Generic Environmental Impact Statement). It is intended to speed approvals and construction, and reduce developer costs, the savings from which, in turn, would ideally be put back into the community. No one in attendance believed this to be more than a fantasy on the part of the drafters of the legislation.

Others wondered about the status of Landmarks and the LPC in this new formulation. No mention is made of Landmarks, and it is conceivable that the Master Plan could include "de-Landmarking" or the abolition of Historic Districts to increase density. Others noted, as a particular weakness of the proposal, that it describes the city's needs as "housing" and "everything else". This neglects the infrastructure necessary to support housing: better mass transit, more parks and libraries, reliable power and water supply, city services like trash collection, schools, increases to police and fire departments – none of which are formally accounted for in the plan. Questions arose relative to the potential cost of this ten-year planning cycle. One commenter quoted the Mayor as believing it would cost upwards of \$500,000,000.00 for each cycle. Others questioned the relative lack of expertise at the Community Board level in parts of the city to appropriately set priorities for development. The cost of maintaining the new bureaucracy also came into question.

On the other side, Commenters suggested that to reject the plan wholesale would be to forever doom the city to a housing shortage, citing a study that suggested that 250,000 new housing units over the next decade were required to keep up with demand. This led to a spirited discussion, the conclusion of which was that the need, never mind the numbers, is for “affordable” housing, as there appears to be a fairly sizeable surplus of market-rate and luxury housing in much of the city, with much more under construction. One member of the Public spoke to the issue of demand, noting that a Bloomberg report said that the city lost 2600 persons per week in the year before the COVID pandemic, a loss accelerated during 2020.

A motion was made and seconded to demand withdrawal of this bill from the City Council. It passed.

WHEREAS, *New York City Council Intro 2186-2020: A local law to amend the New York City charter, in relation to requiring a comprehensive long-term plan* would create a ten-year “democratic” comprehensive planning cycle connecting budget, land use, and strategic planning processes.

WHEREAS, this cycle would include a review of City conditions, including racial and socio-economic disparities, access to opportunity, displacement risk, short-term and long-term risks, impacts of prior development and budget decisions, and current and projected infrastructure needs, and

WHEREAS, the bill would create a new top-down administrative structure, with a Long Term Steering Committee (LTSC) appointed by the Mayor, Borough Presidents and City Council, and

WHEREAS, the LTSC appoints Borough Steering Committees (BSC), and

WHEREAS, the Mayor appoints a Director for the Office of Long Term Planning (OLTP), and

WHEREAS, the terms of office for LTSC and the Director of OLTP are indeterminate, and

WHEREAS, no particular expertise is specified for any LTSC or BSC positions, and

WHEREAS, during each planning cycle, the Mayor’s appointed Director would create three rezoning plans for each community board district, and

WHEREAS, a Citywide Goals Statement would set targets for housing, jobs, open space, resiliency infrastructure, City facilities, schools, transportation, public utilities, and other infrastructure, and

WHEREAS, as an outgrowth of the Citywide Goals Statement, a Generic Environmental Impact Statement (GEIS) would be created, and any proposed development that “aligns” with the GEIS would be assured approval, and

WHEREAS, on December 16th, 2020, with little publicity and no circulation to the public or community boards, New York City Council Speaker Corey Johnson released a document entitled *Planning Together: A New Comprehensive Planning Framework for New York City*, followed by *Bill 2186-2020*, introduced in the City Council on December 17, 2020,

WHEREAS, the top-down process severely curtails or eliminates community participation, and

WHEREAS, adoption of the long term comprehensive plan as it is now written would result in major changes to the public review process that are not fully understood at this time, and

WHEREAS, this would add a completely new layer of bureaucracy and financial burden to a city that is already facing severe and unprecedented budget constraints, and

WHEREAS, implementation would require resources—both economic and staff—that community boards do not currently have, in order for them to be able to participate in this complex and lengthy process, and

WHEREAS, that this fundamental change to New York City land use procedures and processes, which requires a City Charter modification, be approached with city-wide, open hearings with public feedback opportunities, and

WHEREAS, for comprehensive planning to be truly democratic it cannot be decided and fast-tracked by Mayoral appointees; the community must be included in the formation of the proposed rezoning plans, and therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED, that Community Board 8 recommends that its City Council Members withdraw their support for *Intro 2186* until such time as there has been extensive outreach to, and dialogue with, community boards and related stakeholders, and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that Community Board 8 demands the withdrawal of *Intro 2186-2020*.

IN FAVOR: 16 (Ashby, Baron, Birnbaum, Camp, Chocky, Coleman, Cohn, Mason, Patch, Popper, Rose, Rudder, Tamayo, Wald, Walsh, Weiner.)

OPPOSED: 0

ABSTAIN: 2 (Lader, Schneider).

NOT VOTING FOR CAUSE: 1 (Freeland)

2. Old Business

- a. Following was a discussion of the 210-height limit for new special districts. The conversation centered on the apparent difficulty getting funds appropriated for an Urban Planning Consultant released from the City Comptroller's office. DM Will Brightbill was subject to technical problems and was unable to provide an update and a date certain for the release.
- b. Co-Chair Anthony Cohn gave a brief update and presentation of the zoning issues relative to the New York Blood Center Expansion. It was noted by a Board Member that the Applicant presented its proposal in the fall, and the Committee passed a resolution in opposition which was adopted by the Full Board in December. One member of the Public noted that beyond the zoning issues there was the potential loss of neighborhood character that would come with a project as large as the Blood Center Expansion.

3. New Business

- a. Alida Camp proposed an item of new business that might be taken up by the Committee at a future meeting: small retail zoning initiatives similar to those on the West Side established some years ago. The Committee agreed that it was a good idea to investigate this, especially with all the empty storefronts in the District due to the continued retail slump occasioned by the COVID pandemic.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:58 PM.

Elizabeth Ashby and Anthony Cohn, Co-Chairs