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HOUSING

Crowd of hundreds argues over low-income housing



*Downtown Express photos by Elisabeth Robert
Some area residents called out in support of low-income housing.*

By Jessica Mintz

A chance to air opinions about the Seward Park Urban Renewal Plan drew a standing-room-only crowd of 300 hundred people to a meeting of Community Board 3 last Tuesday.

An hour-plus-long public session, which kicked off the meeting held at P.S. 20 on Essex St. below Houston St., devolved into a shouting match over preliminary plans for new development in the Seward Park area that, according to a presentation by the Economic Development Corporation and Department of Housing Preservation and Development earlier this month, include a majority of low-income housing units.

During the public session, some residents offered support for a plan that matches their desire to live in and ethnically diverse neighborhood with mixed income levels; others aired fears about how

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the city's plans to include the proposed 400 units of low- and middle-income housing might impact the revitalization of the Lower East Side.

William Rockwell, a resident of the nearby Amalgamated co-op, speaking to the crowd that filled the auditorium's seats and spilled into the aisles, said he didn't support the city's plan because "there's not enough mixed-income and market-rate housing. We already have a huge amount of low-income housing. Without market rate, we will never have proper development that other neighborhoods have."

Other speakers walked a finer balance between supporting a mixed neighborhood and being reluctant to accept low-income housing. "I believe in plurality," said Steven Danenberg, president of the board at the Seward Park Housing Corp. But, he said, "We don't want to create more ghettos."

As more speakers took their turn behind the microphone, members of a group called Public Housing Residents of the Lower East Side, or P.H.R.O.L.E.S., unfurled a banner on the auditorium stage, prompting a long and increasingly raucous round of chanting to "Put the sign down!" As emotion in the crowd surged into angry back-and-forth yelling between community board members and the public, two police officers arrived to quell the tension and remove the P.H.R.O.L.E.S. members from the stage.

"They're forgetting where people started from," said P.H.R.O.L.E.S. chairperson Lillian M. Rivera, who characterized the sentiments at the meeting as full of discrimination and racism. "We're low income, not low I.Q. We're decent people with families," she said. "These people stop and talk to me in the supermarkets. They know that I am not a bad neighbor. That offends me."

When Anthony Williams, a Downtown resident, came to the microphone, he spoke powerfully, roaring, "People in this community need to live." But when his comments disintegrated into comments about "these racist people, the Jews," the public loudly booed him down.

Councilmember Margarita Lopez put in an appearance at the meeting, but the crowd was so charged that she had a hard time getting her point across. Lopez delivered a report that contained details of her ongoing support for affordable housing in the Seward Park Urban Renewal Area, but talkback and heckling from the audience cut her statement short, prompting her to leave the auditorium.

"Ignorance and fear won the day in the meeting," said Harvey Epstein, chairperson of C.B. 3, in a phone interview after the meeting. "Actually, everybody was saying the same thing — people were just emotionally charged. People were saying, 'We want middle-income housing. We don't want to ghettoize the neighborhood.'"

One issue that polarized the community was the sense that the Nov. 6 meeting, sponsored by C.B. 3 and held at the Educational Alliance, at which the plans by E.D.C. and H.P.D. for Seward Park were first unveiled, was not publicized sufficiently in the Grand St. co-ops. Steven S. Anderson, an attorney for Seward Park Housing, said, "This came out of left field" to the co-op community.

“We oppose how the process has occurred at the community level. The plan was presented as a fait accompli,” Anderson said at the community board meeting. In a telephone interview after the meeting, he said that the Seward board was “not definitely ruling out some low-income component of the plans, but that commercial development is particularly important, and the board simply wants to be consulted and involved in this process going forward — as I know is the case with the other co-ops on Grand St., which collectively contain something in the neighborhood of 15,000 people.”

Now that they have some idea what’s going on, Grand St. co-op residents want to be sure that their voices are considered before C.B. 3 purports to speak for the community at large, says Juda S.

Engelmayer, director of public affairs for U.J.A.-Federation of New York, and a Seward Park Housing co-op board member.

“They’re not really speaking for everyone who lives down there,” Engelmayer said. “Businesses are starting to thrive, and apartment values are going up. Now saying, ‘Take all that and put more low-income or public housing in those areas [areas he describes as already including 80 to 90 percent public or low-income housing], without considering the impact to people, businesses, and the community as a whole’ — some see it as a setback. Certainly not as progress.”

That frustration came out in other ways, as well — such as an incendiary flyer that was distributed on the Lower East Side by “concerned citizens from the Coop Village Online Community.” The flyer characterized the Bloomberg administration’s plan as “a wall of low-income housing projects” that would “seal off our buildings from the rest of the Lower East Side.” Joel Raskin, who developed and maintains the Web site for the Coop Village Online Community, said that Seward Park-related pages had been viewed over 10,000 times since the issue came to light in the last two weeks.

Community groups like Seward Park Area Redevelopment Coalition are intent on keeping the low- and moderate-income focus in the plans. Valerio Orselli, executive director of Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association, is a member of SPARC. Orselli attended the Nov. 18 C.B. 3 meeting, and in a phone interview after the meeting, he said, “It’s very selfish for recent arrivals to complain about this kind of housing being built on this site, when the housing they live in was built as affordable housing.

“This neighborhood has been home of poor people since it began.” The words “ghetto” and “project mentality” were bandied about the debate wrongly, said Orselli. “We don’t want a ghetto in this neighborhood,” he said. “We have been fighting to keep this neighborhood a community of many cultures.... The only ghetto truly created was a white ghetto at the Grand St. co-ops.”

Mostly, said Orselli, “I object[ed] to the overall tone, that poor people are scum, drug dealers and don’t belong.”

During the meeting, Harriet Cohen, another member of SPARC and resident of Grand St., living across from one of the development sites, spoke strongly for the plan. “I am proud to live in a community

diverse in ethnicity, race and income,” she said, though in a later phone interview, she said that the E.D.C.’s proposed 400 units of housing were about half of what could be supported by the area. Conflicting information about the plan itself — how many units, and who might qualify to live in them — was heard during the public session. The Nov. 6 presentation by city representatives proposed 400 apartments, including 300 low-income and 100 middle-income units. However, this week, Janel Patterson, E.D.C. spokesperson, would not confirm those details, nor would she comment on other rumored permutations that included space reserved for up to 200 units for low-income seniors. “There is nothing cast in stone at this point,” said Patterson.

Under the plan, three sites would be developed with a total of 410,000 sq. ft. of residential space, while 410,000 sq. ft. on two other, larger sites would be developed commercially with retail stores that might possibly include a supermarket. However, it was the housing issue that dominated the meeting.

When public discussion of Seward Park petered out, the auditorium cleared, leaving the board to vote on and pass two resolutions regarding the Seward Park area. One of them supported the issuance of a request for proposals for the redevelopment of the Seward Park Urban Renewal Area under the conditions that “the end result of the development would be the transformation of this long fallow area into a thriving and affordable mixed-use community where the majority of the square footage provided is for residential development for low- and moderate-income housing serving all races, ethnic and income groups in our community.”

Epstein, who had leapt to his feet several times during the public session in vain attempts to quell the near-riotous crowd, said that as a task force that will continue to work on the issue moves forward, community members who want a say must “become more engaged in the process. It’s going to take time,” he said. “Nothing happens overnight. Come and be engaged.”

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