

Recommendations by the Affordable Housing Working Group (AHWG) regarding the rezoning of Sunset Park

The Affordable Housing Working Group is a group of community residents and representatives of community organizations who have been meeting since August, 2007. We came together to research and discuss the ramifications and possibilities of the proposed rezoning of Sunset Park on the supply of affordable housing in the neighborhood. The AHWG is Co-Chaired by Julia Fitzgerald, Executive Director of Neighbors Helping Neighbors, and Helene Onserud, Director of the Center for Family Life's Beacon Program at PS1. Both Co-Chairs are also residents of Sunset Park.

Background

At its first meeting the group adopted four preliminary principles:

- 1) Any affordable housing which is created in Sunset Park should be kept permanently affordable.
- 2) It should be a major priority of the City to preserve the existing affordable housing in the neighborhood.
- 3) It is essential to provide quality housing for the very-low-income and undocumented residents of Sunset Park.
- 4) In planning for the creation of affordable housing, priority should be given to the preservation of the wonderful characteristics of Sunset Park, such as its historic nature, views, and open space.

In keeping with these principles, the AHWG has looked at the rezoning both from the perspective of creating new affordable housing and of preserving the existing affordable housing stock in Sunset Park.

On the preservation front, rent-stabilized tenants in Sunset Park are already experiencing harassment from landlords who seek to empty the apartments so they can raise the rent by the 20% Vacancy Allowance. We are quite concerned about the threat of greater harassment if the neighborhood is upzoned. Primary displacement could result if developers have a financial incentive to empty and tear down existing rent-stabilized buildings to build large, market-rate condos. We are already seeing the destruction of viable housing stock under the existing zoning. This is distressing both in terms of the loss of existing housing, which was likely to have been more affordable than what is replacing it, and because of its negative effect on the historic character of Sunset Park.

Upzoning is also likely to result in secondary displacement, since the influx of new residents buying at market rates will lead to new, upscale businesses, higher commercial rents, and an even greater incentive to drive out low-income tenants.

On the creation side, the AHWG has been disappointed to learn of some limitations in City Planning's Inclusionary Zoning program. Unfortunately, there has been virtually no use of the Inclusionary Zoning bonus which is now available in the South Slope. This has led us to wonder if voluntary Inclusionary Zoning is a viable option, or whether it may have to be

mandatory, at least in certain neighborhoods, for it to actually produce the affordable housing that is so desired.

We are also concerned that any affordable housing which is created may not actually be available to the low-income residents of Sunset Park. We were disappointed to learn that “affordable” is defined as 80% of the HUD Area Median Income, which in 2007 is \$70,900. According to the Census, the median income in Community District 7 is \$40,000. We suspect that the true median income in Sunset Park may be lower, since so many of the neighborhood’s residents are undocumented, low-income immigrants who are likely to be undercounted by the Census. We are also concerned that because so many members of our community are undocumented, they would not be eligible for any housing that is created, even if they could afford it. The AHWG would like to see the creation of housing that is affordable and accessible to the existing population of Sunset Park and fears that Inclusionary Zoning as currently constituted will not create it.

Recommendations

As our result of the above considerations, the Affordable Housing Working Group recommends the following zoning for Sunset Park:

- 1) The side streets of Sunset Park should be rezoned to R6B.**
- 2) The avenues of Sunset Park should be rezoned to R6A with a mandatory Inclusionary Zoning component. The commercial overlay on the avenues should be C1-2 and should be limited to 100 feet.**

Further, given Sunset Park’ special nature as the largest Federal Historic District, the AHWG recommends that creation of a Sunset Park Special District with anti-harassment and anti-demolition provisions.

Finally, the AHWG welcomes conversations with the City to figure out new ways to create permanent, truly affordable housing and preserve our existing affordable housing stock, including the approximately 500 units of Project-based Section 8 housing in Sunset Park.