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Columbia expansion forges ahead, despite opposition Judith Messina

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The City Council's approval this month of Columbia University's \$6 billion plan to extend its campus—and remake a large swath of West Harlem in the process—marked what many hope will usher in a new era of prominence for the university and a renaissance for the Manhattanville neighborhood.

Over roughly two decades, Columbia will put up 16 to 18 buildings, including dormitories, classrooms, research labs and performing arts spaces. The venture is expected to create about 6,000 jobs and transform a shabby enclave of auto repair shops, warehouses and small manufacturing plants into a pedestrian-friendly environment with more open space, restaurants and shops.

Competitive footing

The school hopes the expansion will put the chronically cramped institution on an equal footing with universities such as Harvard and Princeton in the competition for students, faculty and research dollars.

Columbia argues that its growth is critical to the city as well as to the university.

"Is New York going to continue to be the capital not just of business and finance, but also of ideas and science and medical leadership?" asks Columbia Executive Vice President David Stone.

The plan has been the fulcrum of an extended battle between Columbia and Manhattanville—a battle containing racial and class overtones. The community fears that the university's expansion will overwhelm it and spark a wave of gentrification that will force out artists and manufacturers, and make rents unaffordable. Looming over the project is the possibility that Columbia will seek to have the state exercise its right of eminent domain for the remaining commercial properties needed to realize the school's vision. Opponents argue that for the state to do so would constitute a misuse of eminent domain.

Benefits agreement

To mollify the community and help mend the historically contentious relationship, Columbia has offered a benefits agreement that includes \$20 million for affordable housing and \$30 million for grade-school education. The university also opened a math and science public high school in September.

Foes of the expansion acknowledge that the project is important for New York.

"There will certainly be a benefit to the city as a whole," says Brad Lander, director of the Pratt Center for Community Development, which advised local Community Board 9 on its own plan for the neighborhood. "It will be good for more people than it is today, but it's a different set of people. Will it be better or worse for the people who live nearby? It will be much less theirs, and there will be fewer decent job opportunities for them."

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