

Queens Ledger

A Street Too Narrow

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CB6 Approves Controversial Carroll Gardens Zoning Text Amendments

By Jeffrey Harmatz

Thanks to members of Community Board 6, the zoning texts defining wide streets in Carroll Gardens will soon be amended. After a long and drawn out discussion about a shortened review process, members ultimately voted to recommend the amendments which would redefine certain streets that are currently designated as wide as narrow, effectively reducing the allowable floor area ratio, height, and setbacks.

The zoning text amendment, known as the Carroll Gardens Places Text Amendment, affects a number of small side streets in the neighborhood, many of which are "Places."

The streets in question include 1st Place, 2nd Place, 3rd Place, and 4th Place between Henry and Smith streets, and Carroll and President streets between Smith and Hoyt streets. Though the width of the roads are similar to those throughout the rest of the Carroll Gardens, the fact that the city has retained ownership of the street-side yards pushes property lines back past the sidewalk, thus creating "wider" streets.

The amendment was created by the Department of City Planning (DCP) as a temporary way to protect the neighborhood from out of character development while the community pursues a more permanent means of regulation through either downzoning or historic district designation.

The amendment was recommended by the board's Land Use and Zoning Committee.

Though virtually everyone in the neighborhood feels that the intent of the zoning text amendments are what the neighborhood needs, it has not been considered an ideal solution for the overdevelopment problems facing Carroll Gardens, and the neighborhood has been divided over whether they should accept the protection that the amendment offers.

While neighbors appreciate the height restrictions that the zoning text amendments would place on the neighborhood, effectively eliminating opportunities for large development afforded by the city's classification of the streets as "wide," its restrictions on floor area ratios and setbacks would place a significant portion of currently standing structures outside of the regulations, which would restrict renovations and could prevent residents from rebuilding their homes after a fire or flood.

There was no shortage of discussion both before and after the board's decision, as members searched for ways to circumvent the FAR and setback requirements that the amendment would bring, but to no avail.

"I'm upset that city Planning gave us this as the only way to our protect our neighborhoods. It's outrageous that we didn't already have a rezoning," said Brad Lander, a member of the board, in a sentiment that was shared by many.

In addition to issues taken with the actual means of protection, a number of board members took issue with methods that DCP and CB6 used to approve the amendments. Due to what many consider an urgent need to protect the neighborhood from overdevelopment, the amendment, offered as something of a "quick-fix" was fast-tracked through the approval process.

Borough President Marty Markowitz held an emergency public meeting in conjunction with Brooklyn DCP to discuss the issue. Though the borough president's meeting was not an official public hearing, it effectively served the same purpose, and a small majority of those who attended were in favor of the amendment. A number of board members complained that there was not enough notification about the public hearing, and that by holding at Borough Hall, it was too far from the neighborhood to provide full representation of the neighborhood.

The same complaint was made of future hearings that will be held before the DCP and the City Council at their respective headquarters in Manhattan.

"Many people have stopped me on the street and told me that they could not come out to the meeting," said one board member.

Despite the reservations expressed by many of the members, the board ultimately voted to approve the amendments, with 20 voting for, seven against, and seven abstaining.

CB6 Chairman Richard Bashner acknowledged that the amendments were not a perfect solution to the area's development issues, but was hopeful that they would be the first step in a larger plan to preserve the character of Carroll Gardens.

"I hope that an agency called 'Planning' will actually do some planning to ensure that this zoning text amendment will dovetail with future zoning in this neighborhood," he said.

Bashner was hopeful that the neighborhood will be fully rezoned next year.