

Bringing Down the Towers of Gowanus

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Councilman calls for hotel ban in Brooklyn nabe

By Jeffrey Harmatz

To long time Brooklyn residents, the Gowanus Canal may seem like a less-than-ideal location for a luxury hotel. But to travelers who don't know about the body of water's toxic reputation, a cheap hotel in Brooklyn sounds close to perfect, which is why hotel development in the area is booming.

A third group, including Councilman Bill de Blasio and a number of Gowanus and Park Slope residents, are calling for an outright ban on new hotels in the area as a means to protect the existing character of the neighborhood in advance of the Department of City Planning's (DCP) rezoning of the area.

"New hotel development threatens to overwhelm the critical manufacturing businesses around the Gowanus Canal, in the very areas where DCP says they want to preserve and strengthen industry," said Brad Lander, a member of the Coalition for the Responsible Development of Gowanus.

And when he says overwhelmed, he means that there are currently four hotels in development and three hotels already completed, with over 600 new rooms, all within several blocks of the small canal.

The purpose of the city's impending rezoning of the neighborhoods surrounding the Gowanus Canal is to determine what parts of the large swathe of industrial zoning is still used for industrial purposes. In the last several years, many formerly industrial buildings and blocks have been repurposed as family homes, shops, and restaurants.

These small, low-density buildings are not protected by the current zoning, and, like many neighborhoods across New York City, are being engulfed by large, out-of-scale developments like hotels and condo towers.

"The rezoning of the Gowanus and Carroll Gardens area is crucial and must be done right," said State Senator Martin Connor. "I strongly urge DCP to acknowledge the physical, economic and infrastructure-related strains that the construction and presence of large scale hotels and luxury residential buildings will have on this historic and traditional neighborhood."

In response to the current number of hotels and those expected to break ground in the next several months, de Blasio has called on DCP to outright ban the approval of any future hotels in the district. He fears that the hotels cause overcrowding on city streets, take an undue toll on the neighborhoods infrastructure, and bring an unsavory, transient element to a quiet neighborhood.

Another problem with hotels in residential neighborhoods is that they have been used as a back door to create high-rise apartment buildings in areas that are expected to be rezoned, or, if the market cannot support hotels, shelters for homeless people.

Looking at the examples of other neighborhoods in New York City that are being rezoned from manufacturing and industrial uses into residential, hotel developers have been quick to swoop in and break ground on hotels in the months before the rezoning is approved. In these and similar cases, DCP has been reluctant to grant requested bans.

"We already have enough hotels in the Gowanus area," said de Blasio. "That's why we need the DCP to step up and help us ensure that the Gowanus Canal rezoning solves the problem rather than exacerbates it."

A number of other large-scale developments are planned for Gowanus that, when complete, will radically transform the neighborhood. These too have been met with community resistance, but several of these projects, like the Public Place site, have received input from the Gowanus community.

"If the city is sincere in their desire to protect the mixed-use character of the Gowanus area they will not allow new hotel development 'as-of-right' in these areas," said Lander.

Le Bleu hotel is one of the many hotels recently built or being built in the Gowanus area that Councilman Bill de Blasio hopes to ban.

The construction boom in the Gowanus area is showing no signs of slowing down.