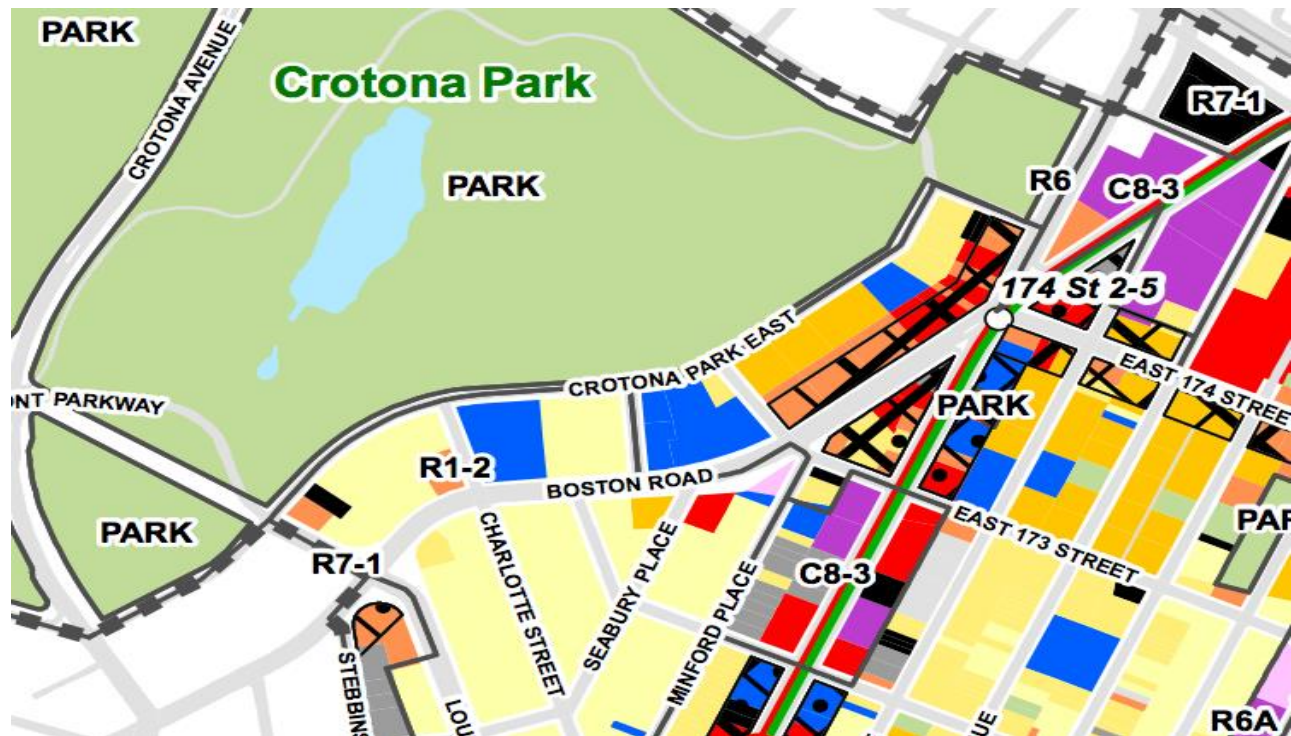


City Eyes Second Bronx Neighborhood for Possible Rezoning

By Abigail Savitch-Lew | December 13, 2016



From City Planning's study area map.

The Department of City Planning has undertaken a study of one of the most impoverished areas of the city in what the agency says is an effort to implement longtime community visions as well as implement a “targeted” rezoning to further housing development.

The Southern Boulevard Neighborhood Study focuses on the neighborhoods of Longwood and Crotona Park East in the South Bronx. About half the population makes less than \$25,000 a year, and 97 percent of neighborhood residents identify as Latino or Black.

The area suffered after the city, under planner Robert Moses, demolished thousands of tenements to construct the Cross Bronx and the Sheridan Expressways. It was one of the communities worst hit by the Bronx arson crisis, with 15,000 units of housing units lost to fire in Crotona Park East. Thanks to the work of nonprofit organizations and city investments, the neighborhood has seen the beginnings of a rejuvenation in recent years, with about 2,300 units of housing, mostly rent-restricted, built between 2005 and 2014, and a massive private rezoning in the study area's northeast slated to deliver another 1,300 units of rent-restricted housing.

The city says its study intends to build upon several prior planning initiatives in the area. These include a 197a plan (the city's first) produced by Community Board 3 in 1993 that focused on fostering housing development at a range of incomes, ongoing efforts to create an accessible greenway along the Bronx River waterfront, a parks department plan to improve Crotona Park, a local organization's efforts to revitalize a retail corridor, and a city plan to transform the Sheridan Expressway into a pedestrian-friendly boulevard with multiple crossing points.

The administration also considers it an opportunity to use zoning to meet the mayor's goal of creating and preserving 200,000 units of affordable housing. It constitutes another example of the administration targeting a low-income community for a rezoning, which some critics fear exacerbates speculative activity that could lead to displacement. It is unclear if the city will propose a rezoning as large as those recommended in other neighborhoods.

The Department of City Planning says it is committed to thorough community engagement in the area.

“We are at the beginning stages of a study which will be grounded in the priorities identified by the stakeholders in the neighborhoods along Southern Boulevard – starting with the survey we developed with local organizations,” said Carol Samol, Director of the Bronx Office of the Department of City Planning, in a statement. “We fully expect that any housing strategy that is part of a larger planning effort for Southern Boulevard will build on the thousands of units of subsidized housing units that have helped stabilize and strengthen the surrounding area. The intention would be to add to affordable housing resources accessible to local residents as well as to address concerns that emerge from a collaborative process.”

In October, DCP invited representatives of about 20 local organizations to become planning partners and to attend a meeting where they shared their visions for the neighborhood. The city also welcomes anyone interested in becoming a planning partner to reach out to DCP at SouthernBlvd@planning.nyc.gov. A first public meeting for the study will be hosted in early 2017.

Undoing Moses’s legacy

The study encompasses a total of 130 blocks between James A. Polite Avenue, 163rd Street, the Bronx River waterfront, and the Cross Bronx Expressway, including Corona Park. It focuses on Southern Boulevard, a north-south corridor with some vacant properties, home to the elevated 2 and 5 rail line. **(Read documents associated with the study [here](#).)**

The city hopes to build upon the efforts of the Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDco) to revitalize commercial life along that boulevard. After plummeting in the 1970s, population in the area is on the rise and a 2010 study by WHEDco found that new residents tend to leave their neighborhood to shop, contributing to a retail leakage of \$146 million per year and great opportunities for building a thriving local business corridor.

DCP also intends to build on the work of its 2013 Sheridan Expressway-Hunts Point Land Use and Transportation Study. That study responded

to the call of community organizations to remove the Sheridan Expressway, which experiences low traffic volumes, is dangerous to cross and separates the neighborhood from the parkland along the Bronx River. A 2006 community plan produced by an alliance called the South Bronx River Watershed Alliance (SBRWA) recommended that the highway be replaced with low-income housing, parkland, commercial, and community facility space—all while keeping the land publicly-owned to ensure permanent affordability.

DCP's 2013 report recommended not removing the highway altogether, but converting it into a "boulevard" with multiple pedestrian crossing points, along with other recommendations to lessen truck volume on residential streets. The study also recommended rezoning some of the area, including some manufacturing zones, to promote housing and commercial development, including along Southern Boulevard, the Bronx River waterfront, Westchester Avenue, and Whitlock Avenue. SBRWA, several Bronx elected officials and Mayor de Blasio expressed support for the conversion of the highway, and last April Governor Cuomo allocated \$97 million in the state budget to fund the project.

For many of the planning partners who spoke with City Limits, the city's Southern Boulevard study represents an exciting opportunity to accomplish some of the neighborhood past visions.

"I'm really optimistic for the potential," says David Shuffler, executive director of Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice, one of the members of SBRWA. He said he looks forward to improvements to transportation, waterfront access and air pollution reduction through the conversion of the highway, as well as new opportunities for economic development, community resources and affordable housing through a larger rezoning.

"It's a fantastic exercise that the Department of City Planning is undertaking to really get a comprehensive plan and vision for the neighborhood that really incorporates all the other planning efforts and community initiatives that are already underway," says Maggie Greenfield of the Bronx River Alliance. She said that while her organization has made steps toward fulfilling its 2006 plan to create waterfront parks along the river, they hope to build stronger connections

to the parks and encourage the city to invest in new infrastructure to address river pollution.

Like Shuffler, Councilmember Rafael Salamanca sees the Southern Boulevard study both an opportunity to improve pedestrian safety and access to the Bronx River, as well as a way to stimulate private and public investment in the area through a rezoning.

“That means investment in quality housing for a mix of working- and middle-class families, with a priority given to families who have called the Bronx home for many years, if not decades. It also means investments into our schools, into our roads and bridges, into our parks and into programming geared towards addressing the needs of our community,” Salamanca said in an e-mail.

Another Jerome Avenue?

Two miles to the west of Southern Boulevard lies Jerome Avenue, the other Bronx corridor that the de Blasio administration has targeted for a rezoning. Critics of the city’s Jerome plan say the proposed rezoning will result in widespread displacement because the city’s mandatory inclusionary housing policy will not provide a sufficient number of affordable units, especially for the neighborhood’s very low income population. One such critic, Harry DeRienzo, executive director of Banana Kelly Community Improvement Association, has the same concerns about Southern Boulevard.

“The city is not hearing local calls from neighborhoods around the city for deeper affordability, even as homeless numbers continue to rise,” he said in an e-mail. He plans to demand that the Southern Boulevard plan includes deep affordability, local hire and union jobs and a right to counsel for all tenants in housing court. He also wants the city to produce an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that examines the cumulative effect of multiple rezonings in the South Bronx and that it is fully completed before the approval process begins.

Department of City Planning officials insist that there is no evidence that rezonings with mandatory inclusionary housing cause displacement.

They say that mandatory inclusionary housing is only one tool to create affordable housing, and that the current weak market in Southern Boulevard will ensure developers seek out subsidies, resulting in the creation of more affordable housing.

Other planning partners expressed hope that they will be able to draw on the lessons of prior rezoning discussions, which they said means ensuring community members are engaged from the start, and that a variety of anti-displacement measures are adopted to protect existing tenants.

Ryan Monell, a representative for Salamanca, cautioned that “we have to be careful not to compare everything to Jerome Avenue”—meaning the two neighborhoods have different contexts and processes. Salamanca says it is one of his priorities to ensure no one is displaced from his community. He is known for approving one of the first mandatory inclusionary housing projects in the city, a 992-unit completely rent-restricted apartment complex called La Central.

“I’ve consistently gone deeper in affordability before a number of projects, deeper than is mandated by MIH or by HPD term sheets. I’ve also gone higher in certain instances, because there are middle-class families in my community who otherwise would not have the opportunity to find housing,” he said in an e-mail to City Limits. “So as long as new housing going up works for the people of my community, I will continue to be in support.”

Elena Conte of the Pratt Center for Community Development is both hopeful and cautious. She has been a vocal critic of the administration for focusing its rezonings in low-income neighborhoods, and she has worked with Jerome stakeholders to craft an alternative plan. But with the Pratt Center a member of SBRWA, Conte is also eager to see the community’s visions come to fruition.

“The Southern Boulevard Study has the opportunity to be different than the other Housing NY neighborhoods—in the way that it seeks to advance the community vision of the Sheridan Transformation, to plan for critical infrastructure and amenities, and to knit together community

plans without an exclusive focus on land use and zoning,” she wrote in an e-mail to City Limits. “There are some initial positive indications from Bronx DCP that the study could be advanced differently—but it remains to be seen how far outside the zoning box and into the participatory planning realm they will be willing to go. It’s still too early to know whether the effort will tackle the issue of displacement head on, and seek to proactively address the legacy of top-down planning in the South Bronx.”

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The city is surveying residents as part of the Southern Boulevard study. If you wish to participate, click [here](#) for the English version and [here](#) for the Spanish.

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