

Bronx BP Hears From the Public on a Rezoning. Most Are Against It.

By Jarrett Murphy | November 3, 2017

[RECOMMEND](#) [TWEET](#) [EMAIL](#) [PRINT](#) [MORE](#)



Jarrett Murphy

Thursday's hearing by the Bronx borough president was a step toward a City Council vote on one of the more controversial of the mayor's zoning proposals so far.

Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz, Jr. heard an outpouring of opposition on Thursday night at a borough hall hearing on the city's plan to rezone a stretch of Jerome Avenue in the West Bronx.

“The South Bronx welcomes new housing but I must ask you to vote no on this gentrification plan,” Jim Fairbanks, a member of Community Action for Safe Apartments (CASA), testified as allies took turns sitting because there wasn't enough space in the elegant courtroom where the hearing was held. “We want housing at rents we can afford to pay. There is already sufficient housing for the middle class in the South Bronx.”

But the woman whose position matters most—Councilmember Vanessa Gibson—indicated a deep desire to support the rezoning, while stopping

short of actually endorsing it as she continues to negotiate with the de Blasio administration over the details.

“Is it perfect? Absolutely not. But we have made progress,” Gibson said of the proposal, which has been in the works for three years. “Through this plan we have an important but unique opportunity to have a voice in the future of our community.”

City says it’s more than rezoning

The rezoning covers 92 blocks in the neighborhoods of Highbridge, Concourse, Mt. Eden, Mt. Hope, University Heights and Fordham, bracketing a two-mile span of Jerome Avenue. The de Blasio administration projects that allowing residential construction on what are now zoned as industrial parcels, and increasing density in places where apartments are already permitted, will create 3,200 new apartments housing 9,500 people.

The new housing would fall under the city’s mandatory inclusionary housing requirement, meaning developers would have to set aside 20 to 30 percent of the new units for targeted income groups, with a higher share in buildings that take city subsidies. The MIH apartments will be aimed at households making between 40 percent and 80 percent of Area Median Income, meaning they could serve families of three making from \$34,000 to \$69,000 a year. The city says the local real-estate market is not yet ripe, so it expects most of the early development under the rezoning to be city subsidized—meaning all units in a building would be income targeted, although a range of income groups could be served.

The administration says zoning is just a part of its plan for the area. The Department of Housing Preservation and Development says its recent preservation efforts have impacted one in 10 apartments in surrounding community districts, and the Department of City Planning says investments in open space, small businesses, job development, health and education are on the way.

“Preservation is here. Tenant protection is here. We’re interested in a lot more than that,” city planning representative Michael Parkinson testified at the hearing. “This is a holistic neighborhood plan.”

But members of the Bronx Coalition for a Community Vision—which includes CASA, the Northwest Bronx Community Clergy Coalition, labor groups and others—are skeptical about the promises of deeper investment. They’re even more concerned that the new development will drive up rents and force people from their homes. According to city research, median household income in the area around the proposed rezoning is approximately \$25,900, with only 25 percent of households earn more than \$50,000 annually.

As Alex Feldman from the Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation noted in her testimony, that means “more than half of our community cannot afford the least expensive apartments created by MIH.”

The fate of the local auto-repair industry, which provides many blue-collar jobs but could be uprooted if industrial space is rezoned to permit more lucrative apartment buildings, is a particular concern. “I don’t want this to become Willets Point,” testified Assemblyman Victor Pichardo, referring to the auto-businesses displaced by a Bloomberg-era development initiative in Queens that have faced **a host of troubles** since.

The Municipal Art Society presented testimony that opposed the rezoning, arguing that the city’s noble goals were misaligned with what the rezoning actually does, especially on the auto front. “In an area with a 17 percent unemployment rate, it is clear the Jerome Avenue area cannot afford to lose any jobs.”

City Planning tried to assuage concerns about the auto businesses by carving out “retention zones” in the rezoning. But Sydney Cespedes of the Pratt Center for Community Development said, “These so-called retention zones will not mitigate the impact of a rezoning” because they have few vacancies and insufficient protections.

The deciding voice

The Jerome Avenue proposal is one of the neighborhood rezonings that have figured prominently in Mayor de Blasio's housing plan. New zoning maps have already been approved for East New York and Far Rockaway, and a final vote is approaching on the administration's East Harlem plan. In each case, the city has pushed to allow more residential density, with some units set aside for targeted income groups. Future rezonings could affect neighborhoods from Bay Street in Staten Island to Gowanus in Brooklyn, and Inwood in Manhattan to Long Island City in Queens.

Under the city's Uniform Land-Use Review Procedure or ULURP, community boards weigh in first on proposed rezonings. Board 4, 5 and 7—each of which claims a slice of the rezoning area—have all voted to approve the rezoning, with conditions. Those votes are merely advisory, as is Diaz's opinion, which he must deliver soon. Next the proposal heads to the City Planning Commission and then to the Council, where by custom the member in whose district a project falls has final say over whether and how a rezoning is done. Fernando Cabrera represents part of the rezoning area, but Gibson is the councilmember with most of the footprint.

In her remarks, Gibson insisted that “this plan cannot move forward without community input and community support” and that she was “working with the administration to incorporate the community board's recommendations in the final plan,” which concerned topics like education, economic development, transit, parkland, the auto industry and social services.

But she devoted the bulk of her remarks to an argument in favor of some rezoning, even if the form is still being fine-tuned. Noting the administration's housing preservation efforts in the area—HPD estimates some \$800 million in public and private investment has been involved in that—Gibson said, “We have been the first neighborhood plan to secure this level of investment this early.” She suggested that passing up a rezoning could mean missing a chance at even more of the investment that has traditionally been denied to the Bronx. “I refuse to let our community be shortchanged,” she said. She noted that in four

years' time, there's no guarantee that de Blasio's successor will be willing to invest as much.

Gibson also bemoaned the fact that the area has not had a rezoning since 1961. "It is shameful," she said. "A lot has not been done." And, echoing a line often used by the mayor and his allies, she said: "We understand gentrification is happening around the city with or without a rezoning."

Pain and God

However, Gibson did make clear that the process is still in play. "I join you in listening," she said to Diaz. Diaz promised at the start of the night that he'd do just that. "I am here prepared to listen to every single person," he said—and indeed, on several occasions, Diaz stopped people in their testimony to ask them to repeat words. (It was thanks to the Bronx Coalition for Community Vision, however, that simultaneous translation was offered for Spanish speaker).

As the evening wore on and public officials gave way to members of the public, there were some who backed a rezoning. An affordable housing developer said the plan would lead to an increase in "truly affordable housing" and commended the city's outreach efforts. A representative from 32BJ indicated the powerful union would support the rezoning if it included prevailing-wage requirements and local hiring. A local resident said the new housing would help people who've grown up in the Bronx and established themselves in a career move out of their childhood apartment but stay in the neighborhood.

But the majority opposed a rezoning, or at least one that doesn't focus more exclusively on housing affordable to people living along the Jerome corridor now. Some of those who spoke had already been displaced from other neighborhoods. Others had been there for years. "Now they want us to leave," one said. "Where are we going to go?"

Race hardly ever came up explicitly, although the crowd did shout in approval when one speaker mocked the possibility that the new businesses popping up as a result of the rezoning would be cafes run by

blanquitos (“white boys”)—even as she called for more dialogue about how to make the city inclusive.

The vast majority of speakers, however, did not focus on who might arrive after a rezoning. Instead they voiced deep, personal fears about the possibility that those arrivals would displace them. One worried that displacement would affect people’s health, and lead to increased mortality. Another cautioned Diaz against a yes vote.

“You are going to be causing pain in the community,” she warned, through a translator. “And God is going to be watching. And God is against this.”

<https://citylimits.org/2017/11/03/bronx-bp-hears-from-the-public-on-a-rezoning-most-are-against-it/>