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Lenox Terrace Tenants' Association Opposes Plan to Bring Overscale Development to Central Harlem

NEW YORK — The Lenox Terrace Association of Concerned Tenants (LT-ACT), which represents the residents of the Lenox Terrace apartment complex in central Harlem, strongly opposes rezoning that would allow luxury towers and overscale retail stores to be constructed on the historic site. The rezoning, which was certified on August 28 for the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP), would allow developers to build “destination retail” stores, like Target or Walmart, for the first time in the neighborhood, while also building five new 28-story towers in Lenox Terrace, more than doubling the density within the complex.

“The tenants association has been against the commercial rezoning plan since its inception. Councilmember Perkins, Manhattan Borough President Brewer and community groups have publicly stated that they, too, are against this gargantuan plan,” said Lenn Shebar, President of LT-ACT. “The thought of eight to 10+ years of continuous disruptive construction to the existing tenants is mind-boggling and frightful. We ask all officials and the mayor to vote against this dehumanizing force of commerce-minded urban planning and put community stability first.”

The Lenox Terrace site has enormous cultural and historical significance as a center of African-American culture. Since its construction in the mid-20th century, as one of the first apartment complexes designed for middle-income Harlemites, Lenox Terrace has been home to a number of key artistic and political figures. Alex Haley, Charles Mingus, former Gov. David Patterson and Rep. Charles Rangel reside or have resided at the complex, among others. For these reasons, the Lenox Terrace complex is eligible for registration on the state and national historic registries. The rezoning applicant and owner of the complex, the Olnick Organization, admits that the proposed changes would adversely impact culturally relevant buildings.

The Olnick Organization has asked the City to rezone Lenox Terrace to a C6-2 designation, which is “normally found in the central business district and regional commercial centers,” according to the City’s Zoning Resolution. No other similar zoning exists in the area, except on 125th Street, where a 2008 rezoning paved the way for massive high-rise infill and luxury retail.

The current residential zoning (R7-2), already allows for additional housing to be built within the existing complex, and even more development would be possible if the new buildings were used for affordable senior housing or long-term care. The complex also has commercial overlay zoning (C1-4) on its perimeter, allowing for small-scale retail and restaurants on three sides of the complex.

“You don’t see places like Target in the pretty renderings that the developer gave the City,” said Daniel Carpenter-Gold, a staff attorney at TakeRoot Justice, which represents LT-ACT. “But make no mistake, that’s what they’re going for here. If all they

wanted was coffee shops and bookstores, they wouldn't need this ridiculous commercial upzoning.”

The new zoning designation would also allow a large increase in luxury housing within Lenox Terrace. Olnick claims that 1,600 new units will result from the rezoning — already doubling the Lenox Terrace population — and it would allow for far more to be built in the future. The new population will increase pressure on local services, including already overcrowded subway and bus lines, and is expected to push area rents higher.

Olnick is simultaneously the defendant in a class-action lawsuit by current Lenox Terrace residential tenants for illegally taking units out of rent stabilization while claiming a tax abatement for affordable housing. The owners made headlines again in July for sending lease renewals to tenants with unlawfully high rent increases — in some cases, more than 30 times the legal maximum.

Additionally, residents have reported that the basements, laundry rooms, and many apartments in current Lenox Terrace buildings have asbestos-vinyl tile flooring that are now friable, due to cracks and breaks in the tile. They are concerned that this is a ticking time-bomb of a health crisis that Olnick has not adequately addressed.

“The residents of Lenox Terrace want responsible development within the complex and within Central Harlem,” Savanna Washington, vice president of LT-ACT. “We are a residential community, not 34th Street north. ”As State Sen. Brian Benjamin said at our Town Hall meeting last year, ‘A project of this scale is generally done on vacant land, not as infill where tenants already live.’”

The Land Use Subcommittee of Manhattan Community Board 10 will hold a public meeting to discuss the proposed rezoning this Thursday, September 19, at 6:30pm, at 215 West 125th St., 3rd Floor.

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TakeRoot Justice (formerly the Community Development Project) provides legal, participatory research and policy support to strengthen the work of grassroots and community groups in New York City to support community-based partners to dismantle racial, economic and social oppression.