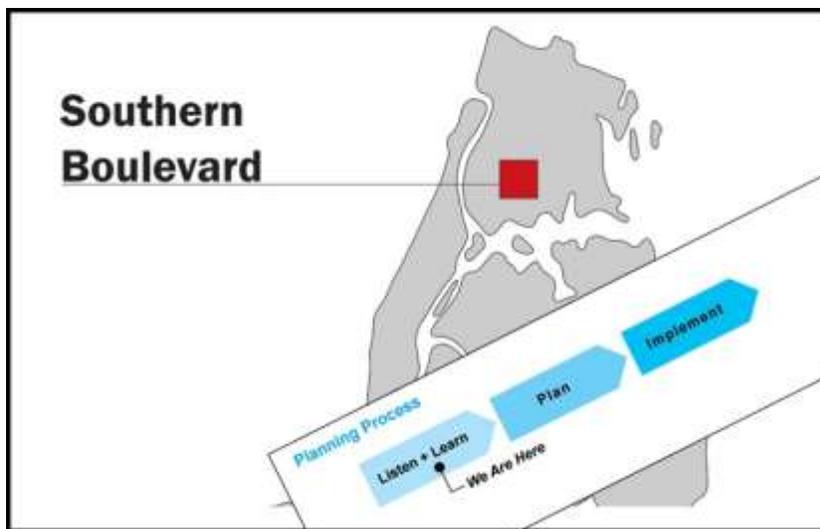


Southern Boulevard Stakeholders Unsure of Planning Process Parameters

By [Abigail Savitch-Lew](#) | May 18, 2017

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DCP/CityLimits

A chart from an DCP newsletter (inset) is where the administration says the Southern Boulevard study process is.

The de Blasio administration’s Southern Boulevard neighborhood study has been underway for eight months, but participants say they’re still unsure what to expect and how similar the ultimate plan will be to the proposed Jerome Avenue rezoning in the western Bronx.

At a City Limits panel event last week, Bronx community organizer Anna Burnham expressed her frustration with what she described as the city’s dishonesty regarding its intentions.

To community groups, the Department of City Planning (DCP) was saying “there’s no rezoning, we’re just here, we’re exploring, we’re just learning about you,” according to Burnham of Banana Kelly CIA Inc.

Yet Politico [reported](#) in March that “Mayor de Blasio’s administration is considering rezoning an area surrounding Southern Boulevard in the Bronx to create more affordable housing and retail while expanding access to outdoor spaces for neighborhoods bisected by a highway.”

Specifically, the article said that during a broader discussion about rezonings and transit at a conference held by the New York Buildings Congress, DCP Commissioner Marisa Lago talked about the ways Southern Boulevard's health outcomes could be improved by enhancing the neighborhood's connectivity and waterfront access.

But the article made Burnham feel the city had been deceitful. Organizers with the Point Community Development Corporation (CDC) are similarly frustrated with what they describe as the city's lack of truthful answers.

"We just don't know what the nature of this 'study' is—and I think that based on the area along Jerome Avenue that was studied before, we know that study proceeds rezoning and we know that rezoning is another term for displacement and we don't want anybody in our community to be displaced," says organizer Rebecca Rosado.

DCP, for its part, says that it's never been dishonest. Rather, the agency contends that the city has never said there won't be a rezoning—only that there is no specific rezoning proposal yet on the table, and that zoning is only one tool among many that can be used in a comprehensive neighborhood plan addressing community needs. Other tools include city investments in subsidizing affordable housing and in a variety of potential neighborhood improvements.

Some, however, are left feeling that the city's proposal to use that particular tool is inevitable. Southern Boulevard is listed on DCP's website as a PLACES Neighborhood Study, along with Jerome and other areas that have been rezoned or are under review for a proposed rezoning.

Nancy Biberman of Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDco) on the one hand is glad to see a neighborhood planning process happening and is encouraged by the amount of engagement; she feels the city is doing its best to be "open" and "transparent"; she suspects that the city may be learning lessons from each of its neighborhood rezoning processes. On the other hand, she says the backdrop of a potential rezoning has made the planning process somewhat fraught from the beginning.

"People are looking at government's action at this moment and saying, 'Is this just going to fuel a fire that's already burning?'" Biberman says, adding that people are still trying to determine whether "community residents [can] have authentic participation, that what they say may actually change the results."

Biberman says the main subject of disagreement and discussion, as in other neighborhoods where a rezoning is among the tools in consideration, is whether or not the city has adequate tools to ensure that housing created through a rezoning is affordable to existing residents and whether or not the city can do enough to mitigate existing rent pressures, including those exacerbated by speculation prior to a rezoning.

Housing instead of highways

DCP argues that housing and commercial development has been a topic of open discussion for years, dating back at least to the 2013 study on the Sheridan Expressway. That 2013 DCP study not only proposed converting the Sheridan expressway into a boulevard and improving access to

the Bronx River waterfront, but also noted the area's need for affordable housing and suggested further study on how rezonings could promote housing and commercial development along the former highway, the waterfront, Westchester Avenue and Southern Boulevard. The conversion of that expressway into a boulevard is now in the works after decades of community activism and city planning, with Governor Cuomo so far committing \$700 million to the project. The area in which the Sheridan project will play out is part of the current Southern Boulevard study area.

And that 2013 DCP plan was preceded and influenced by a community plan produced by Southern Bronx River Watershed Alliance or SBRWA, a coalition of neighborhood stakeholders including the Point CDC, Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice and others. While mainly focused on environmental justice and waterfront access, the community plan also advocated for the creation of 1,000 units of housing where the former highway once stood, priced at a mix of levels "that reflects the actual incomes of area residents," including units targeting to the lowest incomes, and with the land kept publicly owned to ensure permanent affordability.

Rosado with the Point CDC is glad that the Sheridan will now be decommissioned, but is worried that the city and state will pursue a development plan that is ultimately not for existing residents.

"A plan that the community definitely wants [would have] things like affordable housing in it, and different economic opportunities for them, with them in mind, rather than development opportunities without them," she says.

Rosado said she'd want to see any housing created along the decommissioned Sheridan be 100 percent rent-restricted.

However, Elena Conte of the Pratt Center for Community Development, another member of SBRWA, says that originally SBRWA did not assume the housing would be 100 percent rent-restricted. According to Conte, SBRWA's members wanted to ensure that developments with at least 50 percent of units at "deeply affordable" rates and with brownfield clean-up costs were financially feasible to build.

Room for (affordable) growth?

Stakeholders have varying perceptions of how much the area can accommodate additional housing growth.

Chair of Community Board 2 Ian Amritt says there may be room for growth in the area, especially along the decommissioned Sheridan, and says the Bronx economy could benefit from greater mobility across the now inaccessible Bronx River, so long as the development includes units for the lowest incomes and does not displace the existing community.

As to whether the city will be able to accomplish this, his feelings are mixed. On the one hand, he has heard that the proposed Jerome Avenue rezoning has been criticized for not including sufficient guarantees of deeply affordable housing.

"I really hope it does not turn out like that," he says.

But on the other hand, he thinks the area's real-estate market is still weak enough for the time being that developers would rely on city subsidies to build, which would allow the city to have more control over the affordability levels of what gets built—and he has faith in Councilmember Rafael Salamanca and his board to fight for deep affordability.

A 2014 report by Bay Area Economics categorizes this part of the South Bronx as having a “weak” market where mandatory inclusionary housing would not work without subsidy. But the market is also heating up rapidly. From 1990 to 2014, rents in Mott Haven and Hunts Point grew 28 percent, while rents in Morrisania and Belmont grew 23.5 percent, giving the South Bronx a place on Furman Center's 2015 list of “gentrifying” neighborhoods. Some stakeholders note a rise in speculative purchases.

Amritt is also particularly considered about ensuring local businesses can stay and are not priced out by big-box stores. He says many local property owners along the commercial corridors are hoping to capitalize on a rezoning, but that he hopes the city can use whatever tools it has to support the area's small, affordable businesses.

John Dudley, district manager of community board 3, is unsure about his district's ability to accommodate many more apartments, given the recent housing growth in the area. In 2011, there was a rezoning of 11 industrial blocks along the Sheridan Expressway within DCP's current study boundaries. An affordable housing development project that will include over 1,300 units is now rising there, with the first building completed last November. And along Southern Boulevard, “from what I see, there are only going to be certain specific sites that might lend itself to new residential development,” he says.

According to WHEDCo's March 2017 statistics, Southern Boulevard between 174th Street and Westchester Avenue/Simpson Street currently has 17 vacant lots, down from 19 lots (which was 15 percent of all lots) in 2009, in addition to some parking lots. WHEDCo has been working for several years to fill those vacancies.

Banana Kelly CIA Inc.'s Harry DeRienzo and Anna Burnham says they will reject any rezoning that does not have sufficient investments in tenant protections, truly affordable housing built by non-profit developers, good local jobs, and aggressive support for public housing developments in the area. As for whether the area could accept more density, Burnham says she'd want to see the results of an environmental impact study on a variety of neighborhood factors before making that decision.

Other pressing community needs

There have been no public meetings open to the press, with the city so far focusing its efforts on small meetings with local groups. Neighborhood stakeholders had originally suggested the city hold such small meetings; a meeting hosted by Banana Kelly in March allowed Banana Kelly's resident leadership the opportunity to express [sound disapproval](#) of the city's study.

But Banana Kelly's Burnham is also worried that the outreach has not yet been broad enough, with only 250 surveys filled out so far between two community districts with 136,000 people. (That survey can still be taken in [English](#) or in [Spanish](#).)

Stakeholders interviewed by City Limits expressed some similar ideas about what the neighborhoods surrounding Southern Boulevard need most.

Commercial retail offerings along Southern Boulevard could be improved, with Southern Boulevard facing a 14 percent commercial vacancy rate, down from 20 percent in 2009. Part of the problem is landlords raising rents too high for retail businesses to afford—many are already struggling to pay their rent. Another is attracting retail to the area. Biberman says the vibrancy of the corridor has begun to improve as the area's immigrant population has grown, and as businesses come to understand the strong demand for services in this neighborhood. She says that businesses could still use funds to help renovate storefronts.

Given the area's poor health outcomes—with among the city's worst asthma rates, at twice the city average—board 2 chair Amritt also wants to see the city take measures to ensure new buildings are smoke-free, with good ventilation systems and play areas.

Affordability is already a top concern. Sixty percent of area residents qualify as rent-burdened. At the same time, the area still suffers from decades of disinvestment and residents report feeling unsafe. Dudley says board 3's long list of needs includes better lighting and a youth center. He's pleased to see the city already investing in sewer main replacements and intersection improvements.

“City Planning has been active in setting up meetings with the local stakeholders just to talk about the corridor and how we can holistically look at issues involving prospective development or new land uses or services that may be needed,” he says. “I'm waiting to see the fruit of this: Are we going to have more capital money?...Will there be more expense money that comes in for certain programs?”

The Department of City Planning will hold a workshop to gather feedback on residents' existing uses of the neighborhood at Community Board 3's Housing, Land Use and Economic Development committee meeting on Monday June 19 at 6 pm at 1426 Boston Road, Bronx, NY. 10456.

Full link: <http://citylimits.org/2017/05/18/southern-boulevard-stakeholders-unsure-of-planning-process-parameters/>