

East Village/LES Rezoning: Responding to Myths

Q: Is the East Village/LES Rezoning Plan a racist, secretive effort biased against minorities?

A: AAFE strongly disagrees with the notion that the East Village/LES Rezoning Plan is racist, and is against the push by certain groups to split and pit two historically allied low-income, immigrant and working class neighborhoods of the Lower East Side (LES)/East Village and Chinatown. The accusations of racism not only oversimplifies and throws a smoke screen over the real issues of neighborhood preservation, it polarizes against each other the shared vested interests of two allied neighborhoods with long historical ties. The loosely-substantiated claims of racism amount to dangerous race-baiting, and is an impediment to the common goal of affordable housing preservation for our low-income residents in Lower Manhattan.

The current East Village/LES Rezoning Plan is in fact a collaborative effort by many grassroots groups, organizations, block associations of diverse ethnic and class backgrounds who volunteered their time and services to craft together, despite the glaring absence of detractors of the Plan during the hard work in the last three years. The public town hall meetings were well publicized, in all mainstream and local ethnic press and media, for the past three years. It is unreasonable to claim the plan was a secretive process when so many diverse interests throughout the northern and southern portions of the district were involved. The accusations of racism are plainly false and irresponsible when the rezoning process was done in collaboration with numerous prominent and established non-profit tenant rights organizations in our district, who represent and fight for the rights of thousands of black, Latino and Asian residents of our community.

The notion that the East Village/LES Rezoning Plan only protects white residents is likewise flawed and seeks to pit different races against each other, when racism as a rezoning issue in this plan is not present. Opponents to the plan have circulated maps, petitions, brochures and materials to fan the flames of racism, by showing the rezoning boundaries only protect the “white-inhabited” areas. The fact is that many people of color also live in the rezoning area, and that not all whites necessarily have high income in the Lower East Side. The thousands of minorities, that the detractors show as being “excluded” from the plan, for a large part live in New York City Housing Authority projects, which do provide crucial and protected affordable housing to thousands of our community residents. To purposely design a map to that does not clearly identify all the NYCHA properties, which overwhelmingly occupy the largest land area along the East River from Lower East Side all the way to Chinatown, and to count that in the number of “excluded” minorities, is grossly misleading.

Q: Why are NYCHA buildings not going to be affected by rezoning?

New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) is an organization that provides housing for the city’s low- and moderate-income residents, and NYCHA buildings cannot

be bought and sold by private developers at will, and cannot be rezoned by the Community Board 3 plan. *That* was the reason that large portion of Community Board 3 was not included in the Rezoning Plan, not by some latent racist engineering by a discriminatory Community Board. Even so, groups like GOLES and the Pratt Center have long educated and organized among NYCHA residents to understand the Rezoning Plan for the past 3 years during its creation, because NYCHA residents have positive benefits from living adjacent to communities that are protected from rampant gentrification. In a recent Community Board meeting, representatives from NYCHA projects came in support of the East Village/LES Rezoning plan, and pointed out for the past decades they have certainly received help and training from GOLES. The East Village/LES Rezoning Plan's slowdown of high-end luxury development allows affordable businesses to stay in the neighborhood as well, groceries and shops that many NYCHA residents depend on for their daily needs.

Q: Which organizations are involved in the East Village/LES Rezoning process, and what are their approaches?

A: For 30 years, notable organizations like Good Old Lower East Side (GOLES), the Lower East Side People's Mutual Housing Association (LESPMHA), and Cooper Square Committee have pioneered tenant rights and justice for all races. Through grassroots advocacy, public housing organizing, education and protest, as well as through homesteading, mutual housing, building rehabilitation and low-income housing tax credits buildings, these organizations have long represented and led the fight against predatory arsonist landlords in the 1960s and 1970s, to mobilizing minorities and the poor in the 1990s and 2000s for their legal housing rights against rampant gentrification. These are the very organizations, with the thousands of residents of all races that they represent, which actively participated in the wider coalition to diligently craft the East Village/LES Rezoning process. The labeling of this rezoning process as racist and undemocratic cannot be more plainly obscuring of the facts, and contrary to what a democratic process ought to be.

Q: Will the East Village/LES Rezoning push gentrification and developers into Chinatown?

A: Another major criticism against the proposed East Village/LES Rezoning Plan is based on the argument that protecting the Lower East Side will push gentrification and developers to Chinatown, and therefore detractors conclude that this plan should be voted down. This argument is flawed on several levels:

Firstly, rampant gentrification, loss of affordable housing, tenant harassment and eviction are serious problems affecting ALL of New York City's low-income, working class neighborhoods. The East Village/LES Rezoning plan is part of a greater collective movement around the city of local neighborhoods, block associations, concerned citizens groups, and working families to fight for a balanced growth of our living spaces and

business areas. Instead of preventing each other from an inalienable right to protect ones own neighborhood in a positive open process, opponents of the plan have forced the notion that any rezoning is a zero-sum game, a prisoners' dilemma where cooperation cannot exist. Gentrification is not a phenomenon unique to Chinatown, and everything should be done to prevent massive displacement and the destruction of our cultural and historical attributes. A success in the Lower East Side is a success in Chinatown and for the rest of the city. Trying to derail a carefully-crafted plan achieved by democratic consensus puts ALL of New York City backwards in our collective fight against the destruction of our quality of life and displacement.

Secondly, the detractors of the rezoning is against the East Village/LES Rezoning plan by publicly claiming it is a developers plan driven by upzoning, and that it will promote gentrification even from inclusionary zoning for affordable housing. Yet at the same time, the same opponents will protest and disrupt all public meetings in order to push Chinatown to be *included* in the same "flawed" rezoning plan, or otherwise try to prevent the plan's passage unless Chinatown is included. If the East Village/LES Rezoning is not a plan that protects residents as they claim, then why fight to be included in it? Such illogical and circular arguments underlie much of the detractors' arguments to the point it becomes evident that coordinated progress and dialogue seems less important than disruption and the need to gain attention.

Thirdly, the Lower East Side and East Village have every right as a community to create a plan that protects their neighborhood, just as Chinatown has a right to create a plan based on consensus for itself. When Chinatown achieves its own rezoning plan in the future, it would likewise be unreasonable and unethical to be held hostage by groups from neighboring areas outside of Chinatown. Trying to insert the entirety of Chinatown as a last minute addendum to the East Village/LES Rezoning Plan does not do Chinatown justice, when the historical, cultural, and economic landscape is different. Chinatown deserves its own rezoning process and plan that is tailored specifically to its needs. And the longer opponents of the LES plan throw accusations of racism and polarize the district, the longer it takes for Chinatown to reach its own consensus and come up with a plan to adequately protect our own interests. The opponents of the plan tout their claim to advocate for the people, yet would prefer to have over 100,000 residents of the Lower East Side to suffer from continued overdevelopment and predation by developers by holding the rezoning hostage and pushing it to be voted down.

Lastly, the Lower East Side and East Village are Chinatown's biggest allies in Chinatown's future fight to preserve its own neighborhood character. Opponents of the plan have promulgated the belief that the Lower East Side and East Village will abandon Chinatown, and are pushing developers south to unprotected areas. Unscrupulous developers have targeted both our neighborhoods before, and stopping the LES plan does nothing stop rampant luxury development in Chinatown either. This type of fear-mongering only polarizes two historically allied neighborhoods of low-income, working class and immigrant families, who would otherwise support each other in our joint endeavors to protect our quality of life. Chinatown and the Lower East Side will and should support each others rezoning efforts.

Q: Why should we be concerned about open dialogue free from disruption?

A well-thought out plan that is most beneficial to the community should be achieved through consensus building. The reign of silence imposed by opponents to the plan in Chinatown and Lower East Side through physical intimidation, verbal assault, name calling, and other “schoolyard” tactics has prevented such open dialogue to occur. It is hypocritical for opponents of the plan to claim to represent all people and promote democracy, yet will silence and drown out any opinions and viewpoints that might differ from their own. Anyone who does not agree with them is threatened to be labeled a “sell-out.”

For Chinatown and Lower East Side to benefit most from open, unfettered dialogue and mutual discussion to solve its shared problems, any opponent of the plan should not disrupt any serious discussion of problem-solving. There is value in disagreeing viewpoints, but physical disruption of the dialogue and verbal assaults will only drown out serious efforts at attempts for open discussion.

The tradition of democracy did not survive through autocracy or mob-ocracy. Chinatown and Lower East Side deserves a future that is balanced by preservation with growth, with affordable housing and work opportunities for our residents and local businesses.

Q: What are the next steps?

A: AAFE supports the creation of a peer group coalition to undertake a rezoning process for Chinatown that takes into consideration all voices in the community. This coalition will be a safe and open forum for discussion, consensus-building, and education, without the threat of intimidation, disruption or being silenced by those with differing opinions.

The coalition will ensure the fairest and most democratic way of creating a plan together to protect our community, since our common goal is to preserve the unique residential, commercial, and manufacturing character of the Chinatown neighborhood.

Conclusion:

Traditionally, the neighborhoods of the Lower East Side and Chinatown have come together to respond to shared crisis and difficulties and spur collaboration and mutual alliances. Particularly after September 11th, local leaders in both neighborhoods have come together for countless joint-working sessions, public meetings and input forums to shape the consensus of how we all wanted to rebuild from within. Take for example the way in which numerous residents, non-profit organizations, and elected officials came together to plan collectively for the revitalization and best use of the Allen-Pike Street medians. What was once a former physical dividing line between Chinatown

and Lower East Side became the seal that fused the interests of two neighborhoods in a positive tradition of cooperation.

Despite what opponents of the East Village/LES Rezoning plan might say, evidence points to increasing ability and desire for Lower East Side and Chinatown to collaborate in the open, public sphere. The actions and race-baiting of these opponents threaten to undermine years of positive social networking by pitting one community against the other, and reversing the gains made by so many responsible residents.

Chinatown has many special needs which warrant its own devoted rezoning and planning process. Chinatown possesses unique characteristics which made it stand out: the manufacturing job base, the high density of residents in tenement housing, the lifelines of regional transportation hubs for jobs and commerce, the prevalence of small businesses, the need for community facilities and public park spaces, and so on. Chinatown deserves its own planning process, and only open discussion and consensus building can achieve solutions for all these facets of our community.