

Face-off along 125th Street

Rezoning battle: gentrification fears vs. economic gains

BY THERESA AGOVINO

THE BLOOMBERG ADMINISTRATION has an impressive record on land use planning. All 80 of the rezoning plans it has presented to the City Council—including some that were highly controversial—have won approval.

But City Planning Commission Chair Amanda Burden says none of them has posed as many challenges as the proposal to rezone 125th Street in Harlem, part of a plan to encourage development and create as many as 9,000 much-needed jobs in the area.

That's because the concerns of local politicians and community groups go beyond those typically associated with rezoning, such as demands for affordable housing. Many see the city officials' proposal

as an assault on Harlem's status as a mecca of black culture.

"They are trying to turn Harlem into some bourgeois neighborhood," says Philip Bulgar, a manager at Manna's Soul Food & Salad Bar, a buffet-style eatery at the corner of West 125th Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard. "This isn't SoHo. This isn't the Upper East Side."

Office towers, apartments

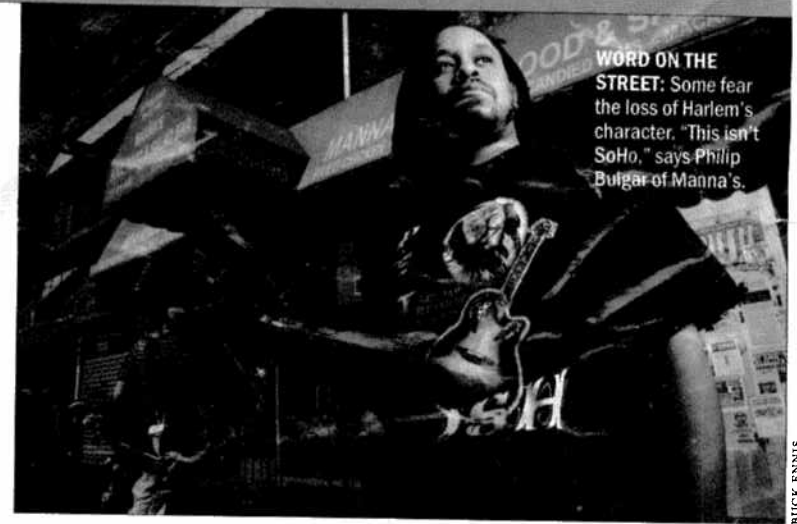
THE REZONING PLAN paves the way for office towers of up to 20 stories, new retail space and 2,000 units of market-rate apartments that would attract higher-income households to the area. That vision contrasts with the low-rise buildings, occupied by neighborhood shops, that now dominate 125th Street. The plan also anticipates construction of as many as 450 units of affordable housing.

To maintain Harlem's character, Ms. Burden notes, the city is offering developers an unprecedented opportunity to construct taller

buildings if their properties designate space for arts and culture uses. She expects that bonus to encourage the creation of businesses, such as art galleries and jazz clubs, that will help preserve Harlem's legacy.

Two City Council committees are slated to vote this week on the rezoning proposal; if approved, the plan would go before the full council. Right now, passage of the measure is uncertain. The council typically takes its lead from local members, and Councilwoman Inez Dickens is not supporting the proposal as written. She objects to the fact that there are no provisions to help the 71 businesses that will be displaced by the rezoning. She also wants the plan to mandate that developers include affordable housing and arts spaces, rather than simply encourage them.

The housing component has been criticized for another reason: So-called affordable units are sometimes beyond the reach of poor people. The median household income in Harlem is \$27,600. Apartments



WORD ON THE STREET: Some fear the loss of Harlem's character. "This isn't SoHo," says Philip Bulgar of Manna's.

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must be income-targeted for the neighborhood, says Franc Perry, chairman of Community Board 10.

There's another potential obstacle. A Harlem community group discovered an obscure clause in the City Charter which says that if a rezoning plan is opposed by 20% of property owners in and around the area, the proposal must win 75% of votes in the City Council in order to pass, instead of 51%. The group, the Voice of the Everyday People, conducted a survey of owners and was tabulating the results last week.

Harlem's unique character

THE CITY'S OVERTURES have not quelled many residents' fears that gentrification will destroy Harlem's unique character. And they are not convinced that development will lead to jobs. Many residents insist

that they need better schools and job training, not rezoning, to improve their economic status. They note that many Harlem residents are shut out of office jobs available elsewhere in the city, and they don't see how adding positions nearby will help.

Residents say the rezoning would trigger rent increases at both apartments and stores. Sikhulu Shange, owner of the Record Shack on West 125th Street, says his landlord refuses to negotiate with him on rent because it wants him out of the way to get ready for redevelopment. That's unfortunate, Mr. Shange says, because his store, which carries a variety of music from black artists and movies about prominent African-Americans, draws tourists and honors Harlem's history.

COMMENTS? TAgovino@crainsnewyork.com

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