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The New York Landmarks Conservancy Comments on the Proposed Rezoning and Development on the South Side of Governors Island

The New York Landmarks Conservancy opposes the proposed zoning change that would allow development of two large building complexes on vacant parcels located at the south side of Governors Island. The new zoning, if approved by the City Planning Commission, would allow 4.3 million square feet of new building bulk on sites just south of the historic district. The new complexes would include commercial, retail, hotel, and educational space.

The new buildings, as illustrated in the presentation commissioned by the Trust for Governors Island, have no relation to the unique history and sense of place of Governors Island. Further, we question how such large buildings can be sustained on a small island with limited infrastructure and with only a ferry connection to the rest of the city.

The Conservancy is not opposed to new buildings on the south side but the proposed zoning change would allow buildings of twenty to thirty stories in height. Structures that would be completely out of proportion with the existing building heights on the rest of the Island. We find that the proposed scheme is driven by consideration of the financial return of the sites with little thought given to the special historic character or physical beauty of the Island, which welcomes over a million visitors a year. This is public land and other important considerations apart from financial return must be considered.

The New York Landmarks Conservancy has a long history of involvement with Governor's Island. For decades we have worked with the Trust and its predecessor organization to push for the preservation of the historic buildings on the Island. So far, a good deal of attention and work has gone into keeping the buildings up. The Trust has our thanks for this. Many of the historic buildings, including Liggett Hall with its very spacious interior, remain empty. Surely new uses deserve to be found for these existing buildings before millions of square feet of new construction is approved.

In conclusion, the Landmarks Conservancy believes very strongly that Governors Island is a valuable public amenity for all New Yorkers and that its future development needs to be harmonious with the special physical and visual characteristics that define the Island and that attract millions of visitors.