



November 9, 2021

## STATEMENT OF THE NEW YORK LANDMARKS CONSERVANCY ON THE SOHO/NOHO REZONING BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL SUBCOMMITTEE ON ZONING AND FRANCHISES

The New York Landmarks Conservancy was a member of the SoHo/NoHo Advisory Group and participated in several dozen meetings from 2019 to 2021. We agreed with the goal of the Group that the conveners presented to us: to update the zoning so it reflects the current residential and commercial realities of this area. We also support the goal of affordable housing. But, like most members of the Advisory Group, we cannot support this proposal.

The Advisory Group members agreed that the historic character of SoHo and NoHo should be preserved. The proposal would allow nearly doubling the size of new buildings in the historic districts. It's an invitation for out of scale commercial development, but is likely to provide little or no affordable housing in those areas. The proposal ignores the real quality-of-life concerns that the public and the Advisory Group brought up at every one of those many meetings.

This upzoning disregards the real and unique asset of these historic districts. SoHo doesn't have parks, open space, a surplus of school seats, playgrounds, athletic fields, libraries, reasonably-priced grocery stores, or community centers; and this plan does not address those issues. SoHo does have historic buildings, which form streetscapes that have attracted residents, artists, tourists, and economic development. The rezoning threatens those streetscapes, and the area's economic viability, by encouraging out-of-scale commercial development that will diminish the historic character.

But it will not provide the affordable housing that the Advisory Group, local advocates, and so many residents support. There are significant questions about how much affordable housing will be created, the levels of affordability, and whether loopholes will allow off-site affordable units, or none at all.

If it is built, the vast majority of the new housing will be in the sites outside of the historic districts, while the rezoning targets rare buildings that date back to the 1820s as prime development sites. No one is saying that there shouldn't be more housing, but there needs to be a balance that protects these resources.

The Department of City Planning has said that Landmarks Commission review will safeguard the historic districts. DCP brought in many City agencies to discuss their role in the rezoning, but LPC has not been part of that public engagement. If the rezoning is approved, LPC will be under enormous pressure to approve out of scale buildings that diminish the cohesive streetscapes of the historic districts. In fact, at a City Planning Commission hearing, one Commissioner said he hoped LPC would not be able to approve buildings lower than the proposed height limits.



There have been thoughtful and detailed alternative zoning proposals from the Cooper Square Committee and the NoHo-Bowery Stakeholders, members of the Advisory Group. All allow respectful development while protecting the historic character.

The Cooper Square Committee, which promotes affordable housing, shows that the City can achieve affordable units without damaging the historic districts. They also note the many loopholes that will allow developers to create out of scale buildings, but pay into a fund to build affordable housing elsewhere. They call for protections for tenants in currently affordable units.

The City needs to study these sensible alternatives and compromise.

The Conservancy would support zoning that recognizes contemporary commercial and retail uses, allows residential uses, protects artists, and encourages affordable housing, but does not require this massive upzoning. We ask that FAR increases be focused outside of the historic districts.

We also take issue with the process that led to this proposal. We believe strongly in community-based planning. Residents and building owners don't have all the answers but they can make an important contribution and their input should be valued. In this case, the proposal does not reflect the concerns that the Advisory Group or many of the members of the public raised in all of those meetings. That does a disservice to them and to the concept of community-based plans.

City Planning has called this neighborhood "high opportunity" and "transit rich" as if it was just a series of subway stations and bus stops. It is so much more than that. We ask you to remember this, listen to the Advisory group, and reconsider the alternatives. Working together, we can find a better plan that protects SoHo and NoHo and lets them thrive.

Thank you for the opportunity to express the Conservancy's views.