

Don't destroy my home for unneeded Penn annex: Take Block 780 out of the plans for expanded rail station

By Eugene Sinigalliano
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I went for a walk in my West 30th St. neighborhood, passing by the lovely St. John the Baptist Church by famed architect Napoleon LeBrun. The church and my entire block between Seventh and Eighth Aves. (also known as Block 780) and parts of the adjacent blocks are at risk of destruction at the hands of New York State to build commercial supertall office towers in order to fund Penn Station improvements. The area is to be demolished by New York State's Empire State Development Corp.'s (ESD) pursuant to a General Project Plan (GPP).

Vornado Realty Trust is to build a Vornado corporate campus where our homes once were. The GPP is proceeding even though the commercial real estate market has been altered forever and Vornado's finances are in free fall.

Numerous elected officials, area residents, property owners, concerned New Yorkers, think tanks, and civic groups are calling for the GPP's withdrawal. There are even Penn Station plans that do not depend on neighborhood demolition for funding. The block also will not be needed for a southern expansion of Penn Station as the existing Penn Station will have sufficient capacity for projected commuter volume if it is converted to the modern standard of through-running.

Yet the governor and ESD are turning a deaf ear. They continue to support this anti-neighborhood monstrosity and a dated transit plan. The governor justifies this by calling our neighborhood "skid row." The governor and the ESD are just plain wrong. The GPP needs to be withdrawn so we all can get back to our lives.

Why? The foremost reason is that the GPP is based on a lie that our neighborhood is "blighted" in order to justify the demolition of our neighborhood. In reality, our neighborhood is vibrant, busy and alive with residential activity, community services, commerce and private investment. The only thing blighted is the current Penn Station itself.

My neighbors and I are suing to stop this madness and are members of the Penn Community Defense Fund. We set out to prove that ESD cannot be allowed to violate their own enabling legislation with a plan that

causes the needless demolition of our mixed use community. If unchecked, the “blight” fabrication will be used to justify massive and monolithic Class A commercial office space in place of our community. Our community services and small neighborhood businesses would not be able to afford the high rents of Class A office space. Section 2 of the UDC Act allows ESD to undertake projects of this scale only when it can establish that the area really is blighted — that the buildings are obsolete, dilapidated, or unsafe; investment is stagnant; property values are low; poverty and unemployment are high; and (ironically in this case), there is insufficient public transportation available.

The project area of my neighborhood does not meet any requirement of Section 2. Take my block; my building at 251 W. 30th, was purchased on April 30, 2016 for \$50,450,000. It has undergone a multi-million-dollar modernization and renovation. Other buildings have also undergone renovations, including the 12-story condo building at 408 Eighth Ave. The Antonio Olivieri Center for the Homeless was renovated. New restaurants and food services have made major leasehold improvements and opened locations at 7 Penn Plaza (a class B office building) including NAYA, Sweetgreen, Sticky’s Finger Joint and Smashburger just to name a few. The ESD fails to note that private capital investment on my block and in the project area is strong and ongoing.

In addition, the project area supports an estimated 10,000 jobs in Class B and C office buildings that are not abandoned, dilapidated or inefficient. The project area contains affordable and legal New York rent regulated residential housing that will be demolished. Area residents will be evicted or displaced if the GPP is approved. The GPP does not provide affordable or rent regulated housing to replace the housing that will be lost. The best way to assure there is affordable housing in New York is not to tear it down in the first place.

The ESD directors approved the GPP without any completed plans or financials.

In sum, the GPP violates the requirements of its own enabling legislation as it is only meant to be used in blighted neighborhoods — not neighborhoods like mine. The current real estate market and specious GPP financials should give Gov. Hochul the cover she needs to withdraw the GPP. If the governor doesn’t, the courts should do it for her.

Sinigalliano is president of the residents association at 251 W. 30th St. and a member of the Empire Station Coalition.