

BUSINESS / REAL ESTATE

Garment District Rally Held to Challenge Midtown South Rezoning Plan

Rezoning Midtown South would include part of the Garment District and would allow for residential housing, creating more of a 24/7 neighborhood.

By **ROSEMARY FEITELBERG**

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About 150 people turned up at the streetfront rally in the Garment District. PHOTO BY MATTEO

PRANDONI/COURTESY CFDA

About 150 people turned up Wednesday afternoon in the Garment District to save New York City fashion and theater jobs.

The Council of Fashion Designers of America's chief executive officer and president Steven Kolb, designers Yeohlee Teng and Bach Mai, and other supporters of the neighborhood showed their support. Six speakers challenged New York City's Midtown South mixed-use plan. City officials are looking to rezone Midtown South,

which includes part of the Garment District, to allow for residential housing and create more of a 24/7 neighborhood.

The project, which would require approval from the City Council, would cover four areas centered around Herald and Greeley Squares and stretching roughly between West 23rd and West 40th Streets and Fifth and Eighth avenues, with the Garment District comprising a portion of that. If approved, the plan would mark the first time that mandatory inclusionary housing would be available in Midtown. It would also give way to key changes that were made through Mayor Eric Adams-supported “City of Yes” initiative including more flexible rules for office conversions, new high-density residential districts and new, more flexible zoning districts.

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Opening the remarks portion of the rally, Frampton Tolbert, executive director of the Historic Districts Council, said that the rezoning of 30 blocks in Midtown Manhattan “does not work for anyone. We want housing and jobs.” The plan would lead to the demolition of historic buildings, the loss of thousands of Garment District jobs and businesses, and the construction of “enormous building that would lead to the loss of air rights.”

Tolbert highlighted four requests to lower the Residential Floor Area Ratio, new strategies to keep the existing **manufacturing** jobs and businesses, respect the

character of the district including its landmark sites' air rights and support adaptive reuse of existing historic buildings.

Asked for comment Wednesday afternoon, Joe Marvilli, deputy press secretary for the New York City Department of City Planning, said the plan is “a thoughtful proposal to bring much-needed housing to one of the city’s most centrally located areas, creating a more dynamic 24/7 neighborhood – all while matching Midtown South’s built environment, and supporting its historic districts and landmarked buildings. We value community input, which has included over a year of robust public meetings as well as positive recommendations from Community Board 5 and Borough President Levine, and we look forward to continuing our collaborative work to craft the best plan possible for Midtown South.”

Making his case, Kolb noted how New York City is the heart of the \$400 billion American fashion industry. With New York City being one of the four fashion capitals, the Garment District is where much of that work has historically happened and where it must continue to happen, he said. Just as Oscar de la Renta and Thom Browne got their start there, so too are Kallmeyer and Bach Mai, Kolb said.

Fashion employs 180,000-plus people in New York and generates more than \$11 billion in wages annually. Kolb added, “It’s not just about runways. It’s about design, **manufacturing**, logistics, retail and cultural identity,” he said, before thanking Adams, the NYCEDC, City Council and many members of the City Council, who have supported the industry over the years. But staying competitive requires investment, policy, alignment and “long promised commitments fulfilled,” Kolb said.

Supporters at Wednesday's rally. PHOTO BY WWD

Referring to the city's 2017 rezoning, Kolb said city officials had pledged to protect the Garment District with dedicated funding, the preservation of manufacturing spaces and targeted tax relief, but many of those commitments remain unmet. A thriving fashion industry requires "real support" for the space and people, who make it possible, Kolb said. To that end, the CFDA's Fashion Manufacturing Initiative has invested more than \$6.1 million into New York's manufacturing network since 2013. That input has impacted 2,000-plus workers.

Joe Rose, former director of NYC Department of City Planning, suggested that property owners, developers, New York City planning department and planning commission, and Mayor Adams' administration have "turned their backs on the garment industry, small businesses, nonprofits, residents and those who care about the architectural heritage of the city." Suggesting that "we all want new housing to be built and investment, this plan is bad because it pays off developers to evict commercial tenants and to demolish commercial buildings that house crucial industries," Rose said.

The proposal would deprive landmark buildings of their air rights, he said. “We’re not anti-development or NIMBY [Not in My Backyard.] There’s no need to choose between housing, jobs and historic preservation. We can have it all, but it takes smart and intelligent planning,” said Rose.

Referring to the rezoning of Times Square decades ago that resulted in more commercial development, Rose said that included “requiring signage to keep the area lively, the preservation of Broadway theaters, and investments that were partly from the sale of air rights that were put into a theater investment fund [the Theater Subdistrict Fund.]” Despite clashing with “real estate barons” about those issues, Rose said the plan worked with the proper balance and identity. He and a few other speakers encouraged attendees to contact City Council member Erik Bottcher and its speaker Adrienne Adams to take a look at the substantive argument to protect the Garment District, allow for the landmark buildings to get their values and to allow for the development of the area in a way that enhances, and does not suffocate or overwhelm all of the things that are needed.

The costume designer Deirdra Govan, who is vice president of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, mentioned how she studied locally at Parsons School of Design and Pratt Institute, and started out working in fashion at 1400 Broadway and 525 Broadway. Govan has also used neighborhood resources for work in costume design for theater, film and television and interiors. She said, “It is one of the only places in the country where a designer can source, pleat, stitch and deliver a garment in 24 to 48 hours side-by-side with master artisans.”

Govan said the proposal would displace more than 5,000 workers and 800 small business including ones that are immigrant-owned, women-run shops and businesses. She also noted that Broadway contributes \$14.7 billion to New York City’s economy and supports 97,000 local jobs. “This district is the location that makes all of that possible. If we lose it, productions will go elsewhere. And they will take jobs, local spending and city revenue with them,” she said.

Wearing a baseball hat imprinted with “New York Is for Glovers,” Katie Sue Nicklos, the owner of Wing & Weft Gloves, touted her status as fourth-generation glove maker. Standing with all of the fashion and theater makers, who choose to keep their businesses in the district, she said, “You’ve seen our collective work on Broadway stages, in Vogue editorials, at The **Met Gala**, at New York Fashion Week and on every first lady. But what you haven’t seen is the drapers, the cutters, the stitchers, the pleaters, the embroiders and the finishers behind the scenes. They are real New Yorkers making it happen on impossible timelines,” Nicklos said.

Within the area, apprentices become artisans and “the hum of industrial machines echoes across generations,” Nicklos said. The neighborhood’s infrastructure includes some buildings with thick oak floors that can sustain the weight of century-old machines. She claimed the zoning laws don’t allow her to operate her company’s clicker press in other buildings in Manhattan. “Believe me. I’ve checked. Without these spaces, I can’t make gloves the way that I’ve been taught. It’s as simple as that,” she said. “Everything we need — our clients, collaborators and materials — is within a walking distance,” she said. “That proximity fuels the efficiency and excellence that this industry demands.”

Another speaker, Custom Collaborative’s executive director Ngozi Okaro, noted how the Garment District has been a pathway for generations of people “especially women and immigrants. Both groups are under attack now,” she said.

Custom Collaborative trains low-income and “no income” women, who are mostly Black, brown and immigrant women to build sustainable, creative dignified careers in fashion. The Garment District is where the organization’s “Graduates” get their start. Custom Collaborative, which has a 10,000-square-foot facility nearby, also works with Parsons, Pratt, High School of Fashion Industries, and others to help train the next generation of creatives. Okaro encouraged attendees to listen to what the workforce development leaders and the voices of the community.

The New York Landmark Conservancy’s Peg Breen questioned how someone could consider “the beautiful nearby buildings” to be teardowns and said that historic districts were created because they are of value to the city. In addition to being signs of our identity and history, they contribute to the city’s economy and quality of life. “The city has cavalierly decided that they are free-for-all areas. This is not a plan. This is a let’s-remove-restrictions-and-see-what-we-get situation. We are going to get a mess. We are not going to get the city that we want to live in or work in,” Breen said.

She encouraged attendees to appeal to City Council members. “That’s on us so let’s get fighting.”

After the program, Kolb said that no one was against change or evolution. “We’re all for new things, change, improvement and revitalization, but we also want to preserve to make sure that the industry can remain here and be productive,” he said.

Having grown up in a family that advocated against human trafficking, Melke NYC’s founder Emma Gage said, “The importance of supporting people in small businesses in the Garment District [to protect] human rights is something that I strongly support. There’s a need for the economy, history, and craftsmanship to be supported to have a beneficial system. There is so much industry that comes through here and it all connects to human rights and the overall economy. Once that’s dismantled, that will have unrecognizable repercussions.”

Days away from her wedding, Gage said her seven bridesmaid dresses were entirely made in the Garment District, as well as her civil court wedding dress with fabrics from C&J Textiles, and services from Tom’s Sons International Pleating. Her after-party dress was also made by a local resource, Wiederhoeft’s Jackson Wiederhoeft. She said, “Making things for my wedding really touched home about how important this area is. It’s so much more than about jobs, when you’ve been here for 10, 15 years or even longer. It’s like family. These businesses have seen me grow up.”

Bach Mai said that a big part of his plan was to train in Paris and to return to be an American designer, who makes everything in the Garment District. “As emerging designers, we don’t have the resources to have our own ateliers. The Garment District allows us to have basically a shared atelier among all of the creators. If I need something, I can walk down the street to get something pleated, printed or dyed.”

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