

Zoned Out

High-rises on 125th Street? Harlem's transformation gathers speed.

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The mounting tension over uptown gentrification, amplified by Columbia University's planned expansion, is threatening to erupt as a new plan seeks to reconfigure the very heart of Harlem. The city has proposed a major rezoning to 125th Street_Harlem's main commercial thoroughfare_that could have a drastic impact on the character of the historically African-American area. The street is now a mix of locally owned small businesses, large retail outlets like Old Navy and H&M, and a smattering of cultural venues, including the Apollo Theater and Studio Museum. Most buildings are no higher than six stories.

The rezoning could transform the street into a canyon of high-rises_up to 29 stories high on the north side of the street_for luxury condos and national chain stores. The plan suggests tearing down vacant buildings as well as thriving small businesses and bringing as many as 5,700 new residents into the already congested area.

Harlem historian Michael Henry Adams has called it the biggest change to Harlem in 100 years.

Developers and city planners hail the rezoning plan as a much-needed boost to the local economy. But some Harlemites call it ethnic cleansing.

"People talk about gentrification, but this would be Katrina-fication done by a swipe of a pen rather than a hurricane," says Craig Schley, the head of Vote People, a group recently formed to oppose the plan. "This would change the culture, class, and race in one sweeping motion." Members of the Coalition to Save Harlem, another group formed in response to the city's plan, worry that the rezoning will rapidly price out small-business owners and residents alike.

In fact, the city's own environmental-impact study predicts that the rezoning would displace 500 residents and 71 businesses_figures that the affected community boards say is an underestimate. Already, the exodus has begun.

Manna's, a soul-food restaurant where a plate packed with fried chicken, collard greens, and mashed potatoes costs about \$9, is one of 16 businesses that will make way for a retail mall in the area. "There was a time you couldn't have *given* away a building in Harlem," says Philip Bulgar, Manna's assistant manager and a lifelong Harlem resident. "Now, the people that weathered the storm can't even afford to rent or buy a place. . . . If the average income is between 25 and 30 thousand a year here, how in the world is someone supposed to afford a \$2 million apartment?"

Manna's and several other businesses are fighting their evictions and petitioning the developer, Kimco Realty, which bought a swath of property in a \$50 million deal this summer. (Kimco, a national real-estate firm that specializes in big-box retail, didn't respond to phone calls or messages left by the *Voice*.) "Kimco's complete disregard for Harlem's indigenous businesses and affordable rent rates is a prime example of the current threat of the destabilization of Harlem," says **Jackie Halpern**, Manna's attorney. The rezoning, which could benefit the planned retail mall, could also result in the demolition of scores of businesses along 125th Street_businesses that the city planning department has said are of little economic value and don't "contribute substantially to neighborhood character."

Longtime residents are also at risk of displacement. The city's plan to allow for residential development on 125th Street, which is largely restricted to commercial use now, would invite luxury-condo buildings taller than any seen in the area. "Existing tenants [on and near 125th Street] are going to be subject to enormous rental pressures and harassment," says Nellie Hester Bailey, executive director of the Harlem Tenants

Council. Already, multimillion-dollar luxury condos have been popping up all over Central and South Harlem (or "SoHa," as real-estate brokers are now referring to the area), driving up prices. Bailey says the trend has led to an increasing number of complaints that landlords are illegally raising rents, harassing tenants, and evicting people to make way for higher-income residents. The plan calls for 500 of the 2,500 potential new residential units to be "affordable" units, but community boards 9 and 10 have called for a substantial increase in that number.

As the rezoning plan makes its way from community boards to borough president and finally to the City Council over the next five months, the opposition is steadily building.

The tension was palpable last week during a Community Board 10 meeting, where residents railed at elected officials for their lack of action against the plan. Previously, a November 29 town-hall meeting erupted into chaos when the crowd stopped police officers from removing a drunk man who spoke out against the rezoning.

"There is a potentially volatile nature to what's on the street," warns Bailey of the Harlem Tenants Council. Huge numbers of low- and middle-income black residents will be priced out of the area forever, she adds, "unless there is militant resistance by Harlem's people."