

A. INTRODUCTION

Neighborhood character is an amalgam of the many factors that combine to give an area its distinctive personality. These components include land use, scale, and type of development; historic features; patterns and volumes of traffic; noise levels; and other physical or social characteristics that help define a community. Not all of these elements affect neighborhood character in all cases; a neighborhood usually draws its distinctive character from a few determining elements.

According to the *City Environmental Quality Review (CEQR) Technical Manual*, an assessment of neighborhood character is generally needed when the action would exceed preliminary thresholds in any one of the following areas of technical analysis: land use, urban design, visual resources, historic resources, socioeconomic conditions, traffic, or noise. An assessment is also appropriate when the action would have moderate effects on several of the aforementioned areas. Potential factors affecting neighborhood character may include:

- *Land Use:* When development resulting from the proposed actions would have the potential to change neighborhood character by introducing new land uses; conflicting with land use policy or other public plans for the area; changing land use character; or resulting in significant land use impacts.
- *Urban Design and Visual Resources:* In developed areas, urban design changes have the potential to affect neighborhood character by introducing substantially different building bulk, form, size, scale, or arrangement. Urban design changes may also affect block forms, street patterns, or street hierarchies as well as streetscape elements such as streetwalls, landscaping, curb cuts, and loading docks. Visual resource changes have the potential to affect neighborhood character by directly changing visual features, such as unique and important public view corridors and vistas, or public visual access to such features.
- *Historic Resources.* When an action would result in substantial direct changes to a historic resource or substantial changes to public views of a resource, or when a historic resources analysis identifies a significant impact in this category, there is a potential to affect neighborhood character.
- *Socioeconomic Conditions.* Changes in socioeconomic conditions have the potential to affect neighborhood character when they result in substantial direct or indirect displacement or addition of population, employment, or businesses; or substantial differences in population or employment density.
- *Traffic and Pedestrians.* Changes in traffic and pedestrian conditions can affect neighborhood character in a number of ways. For traffic to have an effect on neighborhood character, it must be a contributing element to the character of the neighborhood (either by its absence or its presence), and it must change substantially as a result of the action. According to the *CEQR Technical Manual*, such substantial traffic changes can include: changes in level of

service (LOS) to C or below; change in traffic patterns; change in roadway classifications; change in vehicle mixes; substantial increases in traffic volumes on residential streets; or significant traffic impacts, as identified in that technical analysis. Regarding pedestrians, when a proposed action would result in substantially different pedestrian activity and circulation, it has the potential to affect neighborhood character.

- *Noise.* According to the *CEQR Technical Manual*, for an action to affect neighborhood character in regard to noise, it would need to result in a significant adverse noise impact and a change in acceptability category.

Changes in these technical areas are most likely to result in changes to neighborhood character. Therefore, this chapter's impact analysis focuses primarily on changes in the technical areas discussed above. The study area surrounding the project site is the same ½-mile study area analyzed in Chapter 2, "Land Use, Zoning, and Public Policy," and includes parts of the neighborhoods of Melrose, Morrisania, Concourse Village, and the Hub.

The proposed and future actions would allow for the full buildout of the Melrose Commons Urban Renewal Area (URA), replacing vacant land and vacant buildings as well as some industrial and commercial businesses, and several community gardens with new residential, retail, and institutional buildings and publicly accessible open space. The new development would alter the project sites' land use and urban design characteristics and result in some increases in traffic, pedestrian activity, and noise levels. However, these changes could be mitigated as necessary and overall would not be significantly adverse with respect to neighborhood character. While the demolition of the former Bronx Municipal Court – Second District Building would result in a significant adverse impact on historic resources, the building is in such a state of disrepair that it does not contribute positively to the character of the neighborhood. Therefore, the loss of this building would not constitute a significant adverse impact on neighborhood character. Rather, the proposed and future actions are expected to substantially improve neighborhood character. The development sites, which currently consist primarily of vacant or underutilized land, would be improved with new housing, retail uses, a college, and public open space. The proposed and future actions would support the continued revitalization of the Melrose Commons area. The surrounding residential neighborhoods and commercial and civic centers would benefit from the increased activity and aesthetic enhancement in the Melrose Commons URA.

B. EXISTING CONDITIONS

The Melrose Commons URA is characterized by a mix of residential buildings, industrial uses, vacant lots, vacant buildings, community gardens, institutional uses such as churches and police and fire protection facilities, and a limited amount of retail use. While much of the URA is already developed or under construction, there are a number undeveloped urban renewal sites consisting of vacant lots, vacant buildings, automotive uses, industrial businesses, and community gardens.

Much of the URA south of East 161st Street has been developed with row houses and apartment buildings or is under construction. The western portion of the URA is characterized by a mix of small residential buildings, a few with retail use on the ground floor, vacant lots, parking lots, and community gardens. Smaller apartment buildings and two- and three-family houses are under construction along Courtlandt Avenue from East 158th to East 160th Streets. The southern section of the URA is built out primarily with 3-story multifamily housing. Institutional uses,

including several churches, a fire station, and a day care center, are located throughout the URA. There are a number of community gardens in the URA, particularly in the area north of East 161st Street where development has yet to occur. Several large apartment buildings are under construction in the portion of the URA south of East 161st Street and others have been recently completed and occupied. The newly completed buildings and ongoing construction give the URA the character of an area in transition to an active residential neighborhood.

A mix of vacant lots, vacant buildings, community gardens, and commercial and industrial uses comprise the URA sites on which development is expected to occur as a result of the proposed and future actions. The Boricua Village site, which is comprised of URA sites 48, 49, 59, and 60, consists of buildings and vacant lots. The Courtlandt Corner north site, which is comprised of urban renewal sites 56 and 57 as well as two privately acquired lots at East 161st Street and Courtlandt Avenue, is currently occupied by vacant lots, vacant buildings, a gas station, a residential building, and a construction materials business, and two community gardens. The Courlandt Corner south site consists of a gas station, a car dealership, and vacant lots. The remaining undeveloped urban renewal sites north of East 161st Street are occupied by vacant land, vacant buildings, community gardens, and industrial uses.

The streetscape of the URA is urban in character and most areas lack amenities such as trees, streetlamps, benches, and bus shelters. Due to the numerous vacant sites and deteriorated buildings as well as the lack of landscaping and streetscape elements, the urban renewal sites that have not yet been developed generally have an abandoned and degraded appearance. There are no visual resources on the Boricua Village site, the Courtlandt Corners site, or any of the other sites that would be developed as a result of the proposed and future actions. Visual resources in the study area include the Bronx Borough Courthouse at the intersection of Third and Brook Avenues and the Church of Saints Peter and Paul on Brook Avenue at East 159th Street.

Several historic resources have been identified in the URA and the surrounding area. The former Bronx Municipal Court – Second District Building, an architectural historic resource, is located on the Boricua Village site at 900 Washington Avenue. The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) has determined that this building is eligible for designation as a New York City Landmark (NYCL). The URA sites to be developed as a result of the proposed and future actions include no other architectural historic resources. There are ten known architectural resources in the study area. These include the Bronx Borough Courthouse at East 161st Street and Third Avenue; the Church of Saints Peter and Paul and its school are located at 824-838 Brook Avenue, and the rectory is located at 833 St. Ann's Avenue; the former YMCA building south of O'Neil Square Park between Washington and Elton Avenues; the 42nd Precinct Station House at Washington Avenue and East 161st Street; the New Hope for all Saints Lutheran Church at 585 East 163rd Street; the former Hupfels Brewery, located on a block bounded by East 161st Street, Eagle Avenue, St. Ann's Avenue, and East 159th Street; the former Melrose Theater, located at 417-421 East 161st Street; and the comfort station located on the corner of East 161st Street and Courtlandt Avenue in Railroad Park.

With respect to socioeconomic conditions, the development sites currently house no residents. There are six businesses on sites that would be developed as a result of the proposed and future actions. These businesses, which collectively employ an estimated 43 workers, include a used-car dealer and auto repair, a building supply company, a gas station and auto repair, a heating and refrigeration wholesaler, a metal fabricator, and a boiler repair business. Because these businesses are not of a type that is unique to this location and they do not employ a large number

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of workers, they are not considered to define the neighborhood's character. Median household incomes in the URA and the surrounding study area are markedly lower than those of the Bronx and New York City as a whole.

The study area surrounding the Melrose Commons URA encompasses portions of the neighborhoods of Morrisania, Melrose, and Concourse Village, as well as the commercial district known as "the Hub." Morrisania, the neighborhood to the north of the Melrose Commons URA, is characterized by a mix of residential and industrial uses. While the portion of Morrisania west of Third Avenue is characterized by a mix of one- to three-story industrial warehouse buildings, auto repair shops, vacant lots, and residential buildings, the area east of Third Avenue is predominantly residential, with a mix of three-story row houses, five- to six-story apartment buildings, and 9- to 14-story housing complexes.

The southern and southeastern portions of the study area include the residential neighborhood of Melrose and the commercial center known as the Hub. Residential uses in the Melrose area include row houses, apartment buildings, and high-rise housing complexes. The center of the Hub is located at the intersection of Third Avenue, Westchester Avenue, and East 149th Street. These streets, lined with stores, restaurants and delis, and small office buildings, are heavily trafficked by pedestrians and vehicles.

The Concourse Village neighborhood to the west of the URA is characterized by a mix of residential, commercial, and institutional uses. Residential buildings in the neighborhood consist primarily of 6- to 8-story apartment buildings lining the Grand Concourse and Walton and Gerard Avenues. Between the Grand Concourse and Walton Avenue are two large open spaces, Franz Sigel Park and Joyce Kilmer Park. The Concourse Village Houses, located at East 158th Street between Concourse Village East and Concourse Village West, consist of several 25-story condominium buildings.

The main roadways in the URA include East 161st Street, a major east-west roadway that provides two travel lanes and a parking lane in each direction; East 156th Street, a minor east-west roadway that runs along the URA's southern edge; Park Avenue, which runs along the Metro-North tracks at the western edge of the URA; Melrose Avenue, a minor north-south arterial that traverses the URA; Third Avenue, a major north-south arterial that runs through the eastern portion of the URA; and St. Ann's Avenue along the eastern edge of the URA. In the larger study area, major roadways include the Grand Concourse, a north-south arterial in the western part of the study area that carries the highest traffic volumes in the study area; Concourse Village West and Concourse Village East/Morris Avenue to the west of the URA; and East 149th Street, an east-west roadway in the southern part of the study area that runs through the commercial district of the Hub.

Vehicular traffic levels on most streets within the Melrose Commons URA are low or moderate. Within the study area, there are a number of intersections with notable service constraints. During the AM and midday peak hours, there are six intersections operating with notable service constraints, and 10 intersections operate with notable service constraints during the PM peak hour. Currently, pedestrian traffic in the URA is relatively low and sidewalks and crosswalks function at acceptable levels. Pedestrian traffic levels are highest around the Hub in the southern part of the study area. Existing noise levels at locations adjacent to the development sites in the URA range from moderate to high, reflecting the high level of vehicular traffic in the area. In terms of CEQR criteria, noise levels range from marginally acceptable to marginally unacceptable.

C. THE FUTURE WITHOUT THE PROPOSED AND FUTURE ACTIONS

As a number of residential and mixed use buildings are currently under construction or planned in the URA, it is expected that in the future without the proposed and future actions neighborhood revitalization and new housing development in the URA will continue. Additionally, several parks and open spaces are expected to be developed within the Melrose Commons URA in the future without the proposed and future actions. These include a playground along the west side of Melrose Avenue between East 156th and East 157th Streets, a park along the eastern side of Melrose Avenue between East 159th and East 160th Streets, and a public open space on the west side of Elton Avenue between East 162nd and East 163rd Streets. The development of new housing and open space would represent a substantial improvement to neighborhood character in the future absent the proposed and future actions.

Many new residential, commercial, and institutional development projects are planned or under construction in the study area surrounding the Melrose Commons URA. These include several residential developments in the Melrose and Morrisania neighborhoods and the proposed retail and office complex of Plaza at the Hub. Institutional developments planned or underway in the Concourse Village neighborhood west of the Melrose Commons URA include the Bronx Criminal Court complex on East 161st Street, a new public school complex on Concourse Village West, and an expansion to the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Major projects planned just west of the study area include a new Yankee Stadium and the Gateway Center at Bronx Terminal Market. The new development would generate increased vehicular and pedestrian traffic, causing deteriorations at a number of traffic intersections throughout the study area and at two pedestrian crosswalks in the Hub area south of the Melrose Commons URA. Even so, the overall changes to neighborhood character in the future without the proposed and future actions are expected to be positive, as new projects would enliven the neighborhood, attract new residents and visitors, and increase economic activity.

D. THE FUTURE WITH THE PROPOSED AND FUTURE ACTIONS

The proposed and future actions would substantially improve the character of the Melrose Commons URA by facilitating the development of approximately 1,770 residential units, 99,900 square feet of retail space, and 140,000 square feet of community facility space as well as new publicly accessible open space. The new development would replace vacant land and vacant buildings as well as some industrial and commercial businesses, and several community gardens.

The proposed Boricua Village project would introduce housing, ground floor retail uses, and a new campus for Boricua College on a site currently comprised of vacant buildings and vacant lots. Approximately 1.5 acres of publicly accessible open space would be provided on the site. The development would activate the streetscape with stores and open space and would enliven the area by introducing residents and attracting students to a site that is currently devoid of activity. The future proposed Courtlandt Corners developments would introduce housing and ground floor retail uses along either side of East 161st Street between Courtlandt and Melrose Avenues. Public open space would be constructed on two currently vacant lots along East 160th Street. On other future development sites, most of which are north of East 161st Street, new residential, retail, and community facility buildings would be constructed. Amendments to the urban renewal plan's land use regulations would also bring into conformance a new community garden on site 2 and on the northernmost lot of site 1 along Brook Avenue.

The new developments would improve the streetscape by creating new buildings consistent with those in the study area and the URA, and replace the vacant and deteriorated buildings and lots. They would further improve the appearance of the streetscape by adding street trees and landscaping. Although the proposed and future actions would allow buildings greater in height than most existing buildings in the URA, the difference in height would not have an adverse impact on the urban design features of the study area. The new development is expected to create continuous street walls and the residential buildings of Boricua Village and Courtlandt Corners would be faced with stone and brick, two materials commonly used in buildings in the study area. Therefore, the new development would be in keeping with surrounding buildings. The proposed Boricua Village project would also result in the construction of a glass tower, which would introduce a new and interesting building to the URA. Overall, the proposed and future actions would result in no significant adverse impacts to the area's few visual resources and would substantially improve the area's urban design characteristics.

The proposed Boricua Village development would require the demolition of the Bronx Municipal Court – Second District building. As described in Chapter 7, “Historic Resources,” this building is in a state of advanced disrepair. In addition, with 57,600 gross square feet, it does not contain enough space to accommodate the proposed college campus. The demolition of this structure would constitute a significant adverse impact on historic resources. Therefore, the feasibility of reusing and incorporating this historic building into the proposed project rather than demolishing it was evaluated. It was concluded that the adaptive reuse of the Bronx Municipal Court – Second District building as part of Boricua College is not feasible and could not be accomplished without significant adverse impacts on this historic resource (see Chapter 21, “Alternatives”). LPC concurred with this conclusion and requested that Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) level archival documentation be prepared as partial mitigation. This documentation has been prepared and was accepted by LPC on March 30, 2007. Because this building has been vacant for approximately 20 years and is in an advanced state of disrepair with the windows of the lower floors bricked over and the third and fourth floors open to the elements, it does not serve to enhance the character of the neighborhood. Therefore, the loss of this building would not result in a significant adverse impact on neighborhood character. Other architectural historic resources near development sites would be protected from construction-related damage from ground-borne construction-period vibrations, falling debris, or collapse by the implementation of Construction Protection Plans.

While the proposed and future actions would result in the displacement of six businesses, these employ only an estimated 43 workers collectively and are not unique to this location. As such, they do not constitute a defining element of neighborhood character and their loss would not adversely impact the character of the URA. While the median household income in the URA and the study area is notably less than that of the Bronx or New York City as a whole, the proposed action is not expected to result in indirect residential displacement. Much of the housing that would be constructed would be set aside for low- and moderate-income families. Furthermore, even if many of the new households have higher incomes than are typical of the study area, the new population would not be large enough to substantially change the socioeconomic character of the study area.

The vehicle trips generated by new residents and users of the proposed and future actions would result in significant adverse traffic impacts at seven intersections during the AM peak hour, five intersections during the midday peak hour, and ten intersections during the PM peak hour. To address the level of new project-generated traffic demand, mitigation measures would be required, consisting of changes to signal timing and lane configuration. While pedestrian activity

would increase due to the new development, crosswalks in the URA would continue to function at acceptable levels.

Although noise levels in the URA and the surrounding area would rise slightly due to increased vehicular traffic, the increases would not be significant. Noise levels would remain in the “marginally acceptable” and “marginally unacceptable” categories.

In summary, the proposed project would greatly improve the neighborhood character of the Melrose Commons URA and the surrounding neighborhoods. The proposed and future actions would introduce new residential, retail, and community facility development that would draw residents and visitors to the area and complete the neighborhood revitalization envisioned in the Melrose Commons Urban Renewal Plan. The proposed and future actions would result in considerable visual improvements to an area now characterized primarily by vacant lots, vacant buildings, and scattered industrial and automotive uses. The increased activity and land use and visual improvements in the Melrose Commons URA would benefit the surrounding neighborhoods, and therefore the proposed and future actions would contribute to the broader trend of neighborhood revitalization throughout the south Bronx. No significant adverse impacts on neighborhood character would result from the proposed and future actions. *