
Chapter 9: Neighborhood Character

9.1 Introduction

This analysis of neighborhood character follows the guidelines set forth in the *2014 CEQR Technical Manual*. As defined within the manual, neighborhood character is an amalgam of various elements that give neighborhoods a distinct “personality,” including land use, urban design and visual resources, historic resources, socioeconomics, transportation, and noise (all of which are separate technical areas of analysis). According to the *2014 CEQR Technical Manual*, neighborhood character impacts are rare and occur under unusual circumstances.

A neighborhood character assessment is generally needed, per the *2014 CEQR Technical Manual*, when a proposed project is projected to generate significant adverse impacts to one or more of the contributing elements of neighborhood character. In the absence of an impact on any of the relevant technical areas, a combination of moderate effects to the neighborhood could result in an impact to neighborhood character. Moreover, a significant impact identified in one of the technical areas that contribute to a neighborhood’s character is not necessarily equivalent to a significant impact on neighborhood character. Therefore, an assessment of neighborhood character is generally appropriate if a proposed project has the potential to result in any significant adverse impacts in the following technical areas:

- Land Use, Zoning, and Public Policy
- Socioeconomic Conditions
- Open Space
- Historic and Cultural Resources
- Urban Design and Visual Resources
- Shadows
- Transportation
- Noise

Preliminary analyses of the With-Action condition were undertaken for land use, zoning and public policy; urban design and visual resources; shadows; and noise, pursuant to CEQR methodology in the May 14, 2015 Revised EAS. As part of this EIS (see Chapter 5, “Transportation”), a detailed analysis was conducted for traffic, and significant adverse traffic impacts were identified. Therefore, a preliminary neighborhood character assessment was performed.

9.2 Methodology

This preliminary assessment describes the defining features of the neighborhood and then assesses the potential for the proposed project to affect these defining features, either by having a significant adverse impact on a defining feature or through a combination of moderate effects. As recommended

in the 2014 CEQR Technical Manual, the study area for the neighborhood character analysis is consistent with the study areas in the relevant technical areas assessed under CEQR that contribute to the defining elements of the neighborhood.

9.3 Preliminary Assessment

Defining Features

The neighborhood character of the project site and surrounding area is principally defined by its immediate physical setting on the border of LaGuardia Airport, the Grand Central Parkway (GCP) to the north, and the residential neighborhood of East Elmhurst to the south. The project site, which is located on Ditmars Boulevard, contains a hotel and parking facility, and is similar to much of the land uses along Ditmars Boulevard at the key access points to the airport. In general, the areas directly bordering LaGuardia Airport contain complimentary uses to the airport such as hotels, rental car services, and parking facilities. There are also several landscaped areas interspersed between these uses. In the vicinity of the project site, Ditmars Boulevard serves as a buffer between the major transportation and airport infrastructure to the north and the residential uses to the south.

There is no singular defining urban design element in the neighborhood. Lots along Ditmars Boulevard are generally large and have tall buildings (seven to ten stories, with the exception of a three-story social services building) with varying orientations and setback distances from the street. The residential neighborhood to the south is comprised of smaller lots that have mostly one-family and two-family detached and semi-detached homes that are unfirmly situated along the block. There are no visual resources or significant view corridors that define the neighborhood.

The transportation character of the area is dominated mostly by vehicular use, although there are local buses providing transit service in the area. A bus stop is located along Ditmars Boulevard in front of the project site. There is no subway or rail service in the area. Pedestrian activity in the immediate vicinity of the project site is minimal; however, there is a generally complete pedestrian network of sidewalks and crosswalks throughout the neighborhood. Most commercial uses in the area have accessory off-street parking. The roadway system consists of a regional highway (the GCP), major and local arterials, LaGuardia Airport access roads, and local thoroughfares (mostly two-way) and neighborhood streets (mostly one-way). Traffic congestion during peak hours is generally attributed to spillback from GCP ramps. Ditmars Boulevard has a high proportion of taxis, livery vehicles, and shuttle buses associated with LaGuardia Airport passenger activity.

In addition to local surface street traffic, the nearby Grand Central Parkway and LaGuardia Airport are prominent noise contributors to existing ambient sound levels in the area.

Potential to Affect the Defining Features of the Neighborhood

The proposed actions would allow for the construction of the proposed project. The With-Action condition would contain three components: 400 parking spaces accessory to the hotel (replacing the existing 410 spaces), 1,800 parking spaces available to the public for air travelers from LaGuardia Airport in need of long-term parking, and approximately 600 square feet (sf) of ground-level retail space along Ditmars Boulevard.¹ The new garage would replace an existing parking facility associated with the adjacent Marriott hotel. The proposed project would be compatible with the overall character of the neighborhood consisting of airport-supporting uses directly bordering LaGuardia Airport along Ditmars Boulevard, and with the other defining features described above.

Each of the following technical areas were analyzed in either the May 14, 2015 Revised EAS or the current DEIS analysis: Land Use, Zoning, and Public Policy, Socioeconomic Conditions, Open Space, Historic and Cultural Resources, Urban Design and Visual Resources, Shadows, Transportation, and Noise. The proposed project screened out of a preliminary Open Space analysis in the May 14, 2015 Revised EAS as it would not change or eliminate existing open space nor introduce significant worker or residential populations. Furthermore, in the 2015 EAS the proposed project also screened out of a preliminary analysis of Historic and Cultural Resources as neither the site nor an adjacent site contains architectural and/or archaeological resources. The preliminary analysis of Land Use, Zoning, and Public Policy in the 2015 EAS found that the proposed project would result in changes compatible with current land use trends, zoning, and public policy. Additionally, the preliminary analysis of Socioeconomic Conditions found that the proposed project would not have the potential to result in indirect business displacement.

The proposed project would be consistent with the development patterns of the surrounding area as compared to existing and No-Action conditions. The proposed project would complement adjacent uses and reinforce the existing land use character found in the study area, defined primarily by commercial uses complementary to LaGuardia Airport. While some discretionary actions would be needed, the proposed project would comply with the land use classifications allowed within the underlying zoning district. Therefore, the proposed actions would not affect the land use and zoning character of the neighborhood.

In terms of Urban Design and Visual Resources, the proposed project would not alter the orientation of street pattern in the study area and would maintain a lot coverage that is comparable to other lots in the study area. The proposed project would coordinate with the design of the existing Marriott hotel building, and would stepdown in height to the south and east as it transitions towards the residential neighborhoods. The building façade would complement that of the adjacent Marriott hotel and signage along its Ditmars Boulevard frontage would be minimal in order to respect pedestrian and vehicular views along the thoroughfare. Landscaping treatments would also be provided to create a street-level vegetative screen to minimize views of the proposed project for pedestrians along Ditmars Boulevard. Further, the proposed project would create a consistent street

¹ The With-Action condition established in the DEIS for analysis purposes has a slightly greater number of parking spaces (2,200 total) than the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP) application (2,195 total, comprised of 1,775 public spaces and 420 accessory spaces).

wall and provide ground-level retail space along the northern side of the thoroughfare at the project site, which would also improve the pedestrian experience.

Overall, the proposed project would not alter the existing urban design character of the neighborhood and would be designed in a manner that respects the transition from larger commercial uses to a residential neighborhood that occurs along Ditmars Boulevard. The proposed project would not adversely affect the pedestrian experience and, in the applicant's opinion, would actually improve the pedestrian experience in front of the site along Ditmars Boulevard.

The shadows cast by the proposed project would not result in any significant adverse shadow impacts, and would not alter the character of the neighborhood.

In terms of Transportation, the proposed project would increase peak hour traffic volumes in the area and a detailed traffic study was performed. Significant adverse traffic impacts would occur at two intersections along Ditmars Boulevard during the weekday AM peak hour. However, these impacts would only occur at one movement at each impacted intersection and would be fully mitigated with standard traffic improvements (signal timing modifications, lane restriping, and extension of parking regulations). The intersections which would be impacted by the proposed project are major intersections which are not in the immediate vicinity of the project site. Additionally, the vast majority of traffic volume increases would occur along the GCP and Ditmars Boulevard, which are busy roadways that already experience higher volumes than the other residential streets in the neighborhood, and the increases would not alter the overall character of these roadways.

Noise levels would increase minimally as a result of the traffic increases generated by the proposed project but would create no discernible difference in sound levels. Therefore, there would be no significant adverse impacts to neighborhood character as a result of noise.

As noted above, there would be no significant adverse impacts to any of the individual technical areas that contribute to neighborhood character as a result of the proposed project, except for traffic and these impacts do not affect the overall character of the neighborhood and would be fully mitigated.

Overall, the project's moderate effects on urban design, shadows, and traffic do not have the potential to combine and cumulatively change the neighborhood's defining features. The use and design of the proposed project, as an airport-supportive business, would reinforce the existing defining features of the area, and would not create an adverse impact on neighborhood character.

9.4 Conclusion

The proposed project would not have significant impacts on the neighborhood-defining characteristics of the project site and the surrounding area, except for traffic, which could be fully mitigated with standard traffic engineering improvements. Overall, the proposed project would not adversely affect the character of the surrounding neighborhood.