



Greenwich  
Village  
Society for  
Historic  
Preservation

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**TESTIMONY REGARDING 550 WASHINGTON STREET/PIER 40/  
HUDSON RIVER PARK SPECIAL DISTRICT  
BEFORE THE CITY PLANNING COMMISSION**

**August 24, 2016**

My name is Andrew Berman, and I am the Executive Director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, the largest membership organization in Greenwich Village, the East Village, and NoHo.

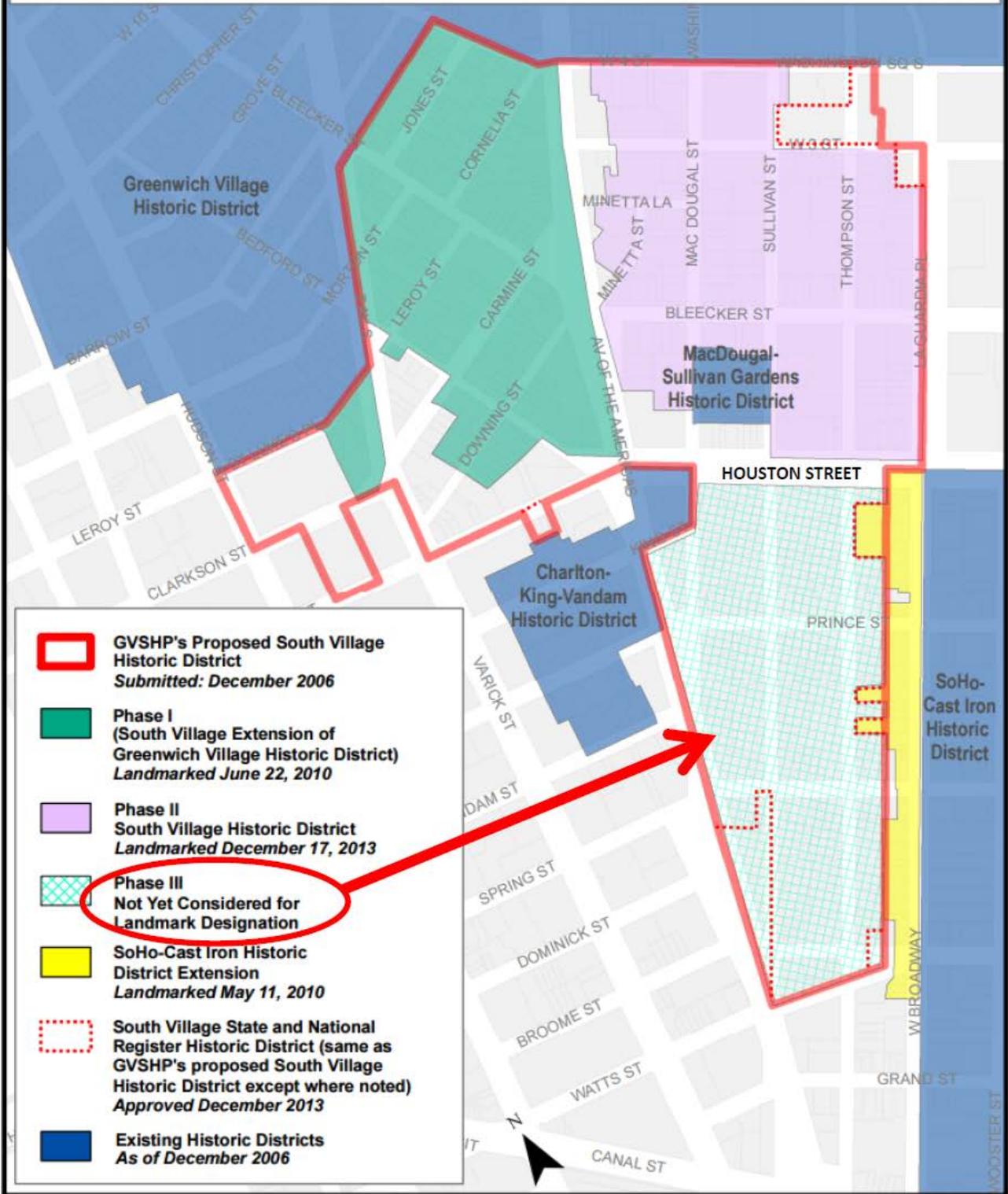
Our organization has deep and varied objections to the proposed rezoning, approvals, and the creation of the Hudson River Park Special District, and thousands of our members and supporters have written the Commission and other city and state officials to that effect. The proposed development is ludicrously oversized, 70% larger than the already generous zoning for the site allows, with the added benefit to the developer of granting exponentially more profitable residential and hotel uses where they are currently prohibited. The proposed development will be overwhelming to the surrounding area with few if any public amenities, on a site ill-suited for this scale of development. Allowing the transfer of air rights from the Hudson River Park to this or any other site is fundamentally flawed policy, and ignores other, better options for funding the park we and dozens of other community groups have proposed. The proposed development in its current form would generate huge amounts of traffic with 200-300,000 square feet of 'big box' and 'destination' retail which would draw huge numbers of vehicles traffic to this already traffic-clogged area from around the metropolitan area. And the proposed development and rezoning would increase development pressure upon the nearby historic, unlandmarked portion of the South Village, while the creation of the Special Hudson River Park District has the potential to unleash a million and a half square feet of air rights upon west side communities.

Should the City chose to move ahead with this ill-considered and grossly inappropriate plan, the following changes should and must be made in order to provide adequate protections to the adjacent neighborhoods:

- The City must move ahead with long-overdue landmark designation of the final phase of the proposed South Village Historic District. We have been calling for designation of these roughly 11 blocks and 175 buildings for over ten years. They have been listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places, and the other two-thirds of this proposed historic district were designated in 2010 and 2013. These low-rise, historic, residential blocks south of Houston Street between Sixth Avenue and West Broadway face increasing development pressure and loss of historic fabric, and landmark designation concurrently with or before any rezoning is essential to protect them.

- Any Hudson River Park Special District must include a clear, strict, and concrete prohibition on any further or future air rights transfers from the Hudson River Park to anywhere within Community Board #2. Such language should make absolutely clear that it is the intention of all parties that no such transfers from the park should ever take place within Community Board #2 again, whether through this mechanism or any other.
- All big box stores and destination retail must be eliminated from the proposed development, with all retail uses limited in size and scope to those serving local retail needs. Only a supermarket should be allowed to exceed strict limits upon the size of stores.

# Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation Progress on Proposed South Village Historic District



**Images Showing Locations of Potential Developments  
using Hudson River Park Air Rights  
in Greenwich Village and the Meatpacking District**





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Allowing air rights transfers from the Hudson River Park is deeply problematic and troubling. Amazingly, three years after the New York State Legislature changed the Hudson River Park Act at the end of the legislative session with no public notice to allow such transfers, neither they, the Trust, nor the City have yet catalogued how many air rights there are in the park's commercial piers which could be transferred inland.

Equally amazing, enabling such air rights transfers was never necessary to fund the completion of the park, as has been alleged, nor is it the best way to do so. The Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation and more than two dozen community groups urged city and state officials to instead consider placing a dedicated tax upon new developments adjacent to the park as a means of generating income for its completion and maintenance, as has been done in Battery Park, Hudson Yards, and Hudson Square, among other places. Such a system could generate more income and would not contribute to overdevelopment of these adjacent areas.

Why was such a system never pursued or considered by the City, State, or Trust? Is it that it would not create the same enormous windfall for developers as the air rights system, nor would it leverage the upzoning of waterfront areas that many have sought for years?

Either way, we think creating a system to allow air rights transfers from the park, even just its commercial piers, is bad policy, and a huge burden upon these communities. The potential overdevelopment of neighboring communities resulting from the 1.6 million square feet of air rights that the Trust has estimated the park could provide is staggering.

All parties involved with the decision-making in this case, however, seem committed to enabling at least some air rights transfers to take place. If any air rights are allowed to be transferred from Pier 40 to the St. John's site, as is proposed here, and a Special Hudson River Park District is created, it must include a strict prohibition on any future air rights transfers anywhere else in Community Board #2. The Trust and others have falsely claimed that there are no other sites in CB 2 where air rights could be transferred in the future. This is patently and demonstrably false.

Within the "one-block inland" zone to which air rights can be transferred, there are several sites without landmark protections and with no zoning height limits where air

rights could easily be transferred, including the blocks both north and south of Little West 12<sup>th</sup> Street, as well as between Clarkson and Leroy Street. If current contextual zoning limits were changed – which this Mayor and this City Planning Commission have shown themselves too willing to do, and which could easily be a part of any air rights transfer rezoning – then there are literally a dozen sites between Leroy and 14<sup>th</sup> Street where such air rights could go, significantly increasing allowable development in this area.

Allowing the transfer of air rights from the park to inland areas is wrong, period, but unfortunately the State Legislature has already made that possible. If you do allow it, there must be concrete assurances that this is the one and only time it is allowed in Community Board 2, by strictly and explicitly prohibiting it in the future.



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The eleven blocks and 175 buildings between West Houston and Watts Streets, Sixth Avenue and West Broadway, which form the final and not-yet-landmarked phase of the proposed South Village Historic District, are uniquely rich in New York and American history. They are also under huge amounts of development pressure, with historic buildings coming down and out-of-scale new developments going up every day. This pressure will only increase if this rezoning is passed without the long-overdue landmark protections this area needs.

It's not just GVSHP which thinks this historic area merits preservation. In 2006 we first proposed this area for designation along with the other 25 blocks of the South Village which have since been landmarked. Since then these blocks have been listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places. They were deemed one of the seven most historically significant and endangered sites in New York State by the Preservation League of New York State in 2012. Every local elected official who has represented the area since the proposal was first made has supported designation, including both current City Councilmembers and the Borough President. The Community Board supports it, every local block association and civic group supports it, and literally thousands of area residents and other New Yorkers have written to the City urging designation. The only relevant entities to not yet support designation is the Landmarks Preservation Commission and the Mayor.

Support for designation is strong with good reason. Walking down these streets literally transports you back in time to turn-of-the-last-century New York, when this neighborhood was awash with immigrants and just starting to become home to a new generation of New Yorkers who were attracted to the area's unconventional and iconoclastic streets and culture. It's home to America's oldest extant Italian-American church, a rich array of model tenement housing, some of Lower Manhattan's oldest surviving houses, and remarkably intact tenements built by and for immigrants in every conceivable style, shape, and configuration.

In only just the last few years, that historic fabric has begun to fray, however, with an almost uniformly two-to-six story landscape being replaced by one hundred fifty foot tall towers. Current zoning would actually allow three hundred foot tall towers on some sites. And the proposed St. John's rezoning nearby will only increase the likelihood of this happening sooner and more frequently.

That is why if the proposed rezoning and other approvals are to be granted, it should only be done so if this final leg of the proposed South Village Historic District is landmarked, in its entirety. This must take place concurrently with or before the rezoning takes effect. We know the timing for this is very tight, but we have been calling for this for over a year, and the Community Board and our Councilmember have been raising this for some time as well. We have no doubt that if the City wanted to do this, it would be done.



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The proposed development on the St. John's site would include 200,000 to 300,000 square feet of 'big box' stores and destination retail. That's about the size of the entire six-block Rockefeller Center retail concourse, or more than four times the size of the retail space at Chelsea Market.

Think about the amount of foot traffic those retail centers generate. But Rockefeller Center is located literally on top of several major subway lines, and Chelsea Market is but one block from three major subway lines and just one block further from three more.

The St. John's Terminal site, however, which this developer proposes to turn into a big box and destination retail hub, is three long avenue blocks from a single local subway line. It is, however, surrounded by streets and tunnels which eventually lead to every corner of the New York Metropolitan area. And while these are some of the most congested and overburdened streets in the entire city, it is no doubt by this means, by car, that shoppers will come to this new shopping hub if this developer is granted the approvals being sought.

This would be devastating for the surrounding areas – the West Village, the South Village, Hudson Square and West SoHo. The West and South Village are residential neighborhoods. The City has been seeking to increase the residential population of Hudson Square and West SoHo. These areas already see traffic back-ups emanating from the Holland Tunnel that stretch for blocks and last for hours. Adding into the mix thousands of shoppers trying to reach and return from the area by car would be an unmitigated disaster.

That is why we are urging that if any approvals are granted for this site, they must prohibit any 'Big Box' store developments, and must eliminate all 'destination retail.' Retail should be restricted in size and types to stores that will serve the local community; larger individual stores should only be allowed for a supermarket.

This increasingly residential area has a more than large enough permanent population to make the retail spaces here viable by orienting them towards the surrounding community. A destination retail or big box component will only add to the area's already vexing traffic problems, and to the overwhelming and negative impact which this proposed development will have on the surrounding area.





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The proposed development on the three-block St. John's site is massive – five buildings, nearly two million gross square feet of space, several towers including one that reaches about 480 feet in height (considerably taller than the nearby odious Trump SoHo). An as-of-right development could be just as tall if not taller, and in many ways just as impactful if not more so. But there is no denying that the requested approvals would be wildly beneficial to this developer, while what the public gets in return is relatively paltry by comparison.

The benefits largely consist of the \$100 million towards Pier 40 repairs and about 19% of the total project space going towards affordable housing (the 25 and 30% figures often cited by the developers of course exclude all of the project's commercial space). While these public benefits clearly cost something, they pale by comparison to the vast increase in value and profitability the City will be giving this developer by increasing the allowable size of development by 70%, allowing the exponentially more profitable and previously prohibited residential and hotel uses on the entire site, and allowing the bulk of the development to be moved to the area north of Houston Street.

While the as-of-right development which could take place here is troubling as well, let's consider what the proposed development's impact would be. The designs show a massive, pedestrian-unfriendly wall along both Washington and West Streets. The buildings themselves, while containing a handsome updated industrial-style window set within a masonry frame, would repeat this motif ad infinitum across multiple buildings at an enormous, overpowering scale. Virtually no public space is being offered, and the towers would loom over the surrounding neighborhood and shadow the adjacent park and playing fields.

It should be noted that the tallest tower at the north end of the complex would be more than three times the height of both the new residential development being built directly to the north of it, and the One Morton Square development directly to the north of that – both of which already far exceed the height of most of their surroundings. And as previously mentioned, the traffic the current plan would generate would overwhelm the surrounding neighborhoods, the historic low-rise South Village would face vastly increased development pressure, and the entire Greenwich Village and Meatpacking District waterfront would be one step closer to further overdevelopment from the air rights transfer framework which these approvals would establish.

Our communities deserve considerably more, and to be blunt, this developer deserves considerably less. This plan should be fundamentally re-thought. And at the very, very least, landmark protections should be granted to the South Village, prohibitions on further park air rights transfers should be granted to the remainder of Community Board 2, and the traffic-generating big box store and destination retail component of the development should be eliminated.