



**Greenwich
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Society for
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**TESTIMONY OF THE GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY
FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION
REGARDING HARDSHIP APPLICATION AND
BULK AND USE VARIANCE REQUESTS FOR
437 WEST 13TH STREET, MANHATTAN
Calendar # 314-08-BZ**

Good afternoon Commissioners, my name is Andrew Berman and I am the Executive Director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation. GVSHP is the largest membership organization in Greenwich Village, the East Village, and NoHo. I am here today to express our opposition to the proposed bulk and use variances for 437 West 13th Street.

First let me say that we do not believe that there is any actual hardship in this case, and certainly not one to justify the requested 55% increase in the allowable size of the building and the tripling of the allowable size of the retail. While the application claims that the presence of the High Line on the corner of the property is a hardship, it ignores the fact that the considerable public investment which will turn this disused rail line into a public park will actually have an enormously beneficial effect on this property and this owner. At no expense to them, a world-class attraction is being created literally at the doorstep of their proposed development, which will no doubt tremendously increase their property values and the return on their investment.

The application claims that the limits of the 10,000 sq. ft. floor plates imposed by the presence of the High Line and the floor area ratio (FAR) of 5 imposed by the zoning do not allow a reasonable return on this property. But this claim is belied by multiple recent projects in this neighborhood using an FAR of 5, or floor plates of 10,000 sq. ft. or even smaller. And while the developer claims that the positioning of the High Line on their property does not allow them to straddle the railway and thereby make their floor plates larger, this claim ignores the fact that building a structure to straddle the High Line is actually also very expensive. In fact, it would seem that the setback waivers the applicant is seeking, to which there are no objections, would be sufficient to overcome any hardship in this case, if in fact there is one.

In contrast to the setback waivers, the bulk and use variances requested do raise strong objections in terms of the impact they would have upon the character of the surrounding neighborhood. The proposed development is within the Gansevoort Market District listed on the State and National Register of Historic Places, and in fact would involve demolition of a building listed as contributing to that district. The development would also directly abut and face the NYC Gansevoort Market Historic District. The size and scale of the proposed building – nearly all-glass with an enormous 215 ft. tall blank wall facing north - - are entirely too great for this neighborhood, and will negatively affect its character, as well as shadowing the High Line.

The requested tripling of the size of allowable retail space in the base of the building would also have an enormous, and we believe negative, impact upon the character of this neighborhood. Small stores at ground level typify the Meatpacking District, not giant big-box retail. The insertion of multi-level big-box retail into the neighborhood will profoundly change vehicular and pedestrian traffic patterns, and likely add to conflicts with existing uses, such as the remaining nearby meatpackers.

In short, the proposed development would fundamentally alter the character of this neighborhood – bringing in larger and taller towers to a neighborhood characterized by low-scale and historic structures, and changing the traffic patterns and the sheer scale of retail spaces. This is not the future we want to see for the Meatpacking District, and we hope that you will not authorize it. For better or worse, there has been plenty of development in the Meatpacking District in recent years which stayed within the size and use limitations of the zoning. There is no reason why those same rules cannot be followed in this case, especially when the hardship claim seems questionable at best. I therefore strongly urge you to reject the proposed bulk and use variances for 437 West 13th Street.