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Campaign 2005: Mayoral Candidates' Plans On Planning

by Tom Angotti

16 Aug 2005

The culture of mayoral politics in this city continues to invoke strict allegiance to the imperial power of the office. The game is how you get to City Hall so you, the mayor, can make things happen -- not how you can help neighborhood residents make things happen. And most people, whether in office or not, don't have the foggiest idea how the arcane systems of zoning and planning work.

None of the mayoral candidates are making land use issues the front and center of their campaigns, though they mention them in their ideas about housing. But a little digging unearths some distinctly different approaches.

Bloomberg's Down-zoning and Up-zoning

Buried among Bloomberg's claims of accomplishments are two initiatives connected to land use -- down-zonings and up-zonings.

The down-zonings are of low-density neighborhoods in the outer boroughs to prevent "overdevelopment." The down-zonings are aimed at preventing new housing development and conversions that build to the maximum floor area permitted under existing zoning. In other words, they keep developers out. While in some cases these down-zonings are long-overdue measures to help preserve stable communities, in other cases they end up having little effect except helping homeowners in the areas to decide who to pull the lever for in November. In many cases they respond to anti-immigrant prejudices, since many of their new neighbors happen to be immigrants.

The other controversial Bloomberg policy has been to up-zone areas in more dense in-lying residential communities, like Greenpoint and Williamsburg in Brooklyn, one of the deeds for which Bloomberg counts the numbers of jobs and housing that are projected to be created, but has nothing to say about the enormous local resistance he faced.

Ferrer's Inclusionary Zoning And Community-Based Planning

Fernando Ferrer offers a clear alternative to Bloomberg. The Bloomberg administration continues to oppose mandatory "inclusionary zoning"--the use of zoning to make housing developers include units for people with low and moderate incomes. At first, Bloomberg's planning experts claimed that inclusionary zoning doesn't work, and they opposed a proposal to incorporate inclusionary provisions in the Fourth Avenue rezoning in Brooklyn, which would have allowed developers to voluntarily incorporate affordable housing units in return for getting more square feet of building space. Then, after considerable pressure over the mayor's rezoning of Greenpoint and Williamsburg in Brooklyn, the administration went along with voluntary inclusionary measures.

In contrast, Ferrer proposes to mandate inclusionary zoning in target areas that are under development pressure. He would require that 30 percent of new housing units in these areas be affordable -- 15 percent for low-income and 15 percent for moderate-income households. In return, he would offer a series of bonuses and incentives to developers to make it worth their while. If they provide more than 50 percent affordable units, they would receive financial incentives and density bonuses. Under certain conditions, they could transfer their development rights to other parcels of land or contribute to a housing fund that would produce affordable units elsewhere.

Ferrer also proposes a comprehensive zoning overhaul and reduction of red tape, but it's not clear what this would mean; in the past, City Hall has retreated every time they faced the Herculean task of changing the thousands of custom-made zoning provisions that developers and individuals are invested in, and communities have fought for or against, over the last half century.

Ferrer recently chose to announce his plan for housing while in the Melrose neighborhood of the Bronx., where he had supported community residents who opposed a city housing proposal that would have displaced many people when he was Bronx Borough president. He funded their alternative plan, which was then adopted by the

city, and which has led to revitalization of the neighborhood. Subsequently Ferrer has been an advocate of community-based planning, and supported the principles of the Campaign for Community-based Planning in the last election.

Weiner On Opening Up The Process

Anthony Weiner, however, hits the hardest at the planning process under the Bloomberg administration. He derides “too many insider deals” and says that too many of the new projects are financed “off budget” – through PILOTS (Payments in Lieu of Taxes) and new special authorities like the ones used in the mayor’s Midtown West plan. Weiner calls for “legal requirements that ban insider deals” and “laws that open up the bidding process,” ending the practice of no-bid contracts. Weiner also criticizes the environmental review process, saying that Environmental Impact Statements are “tools of development rather than what they were intended to be.”

Fields On Inclusionary Zoning

C. Virginia Fields claims credit for having sponsored an alternative plan for Manhattan’s West Side that did not include Bloomberg’s ill-fated Jets stadium. Fields has also come out in favor of mandatory inclusionary zoning in neighborhoods “shifting from affordable to market-rate housing” and a voluntary program in other areas.

Other Races

Beyond the mayoral candidates, at least two others who are running this year have come out with relevant statements.

Norman Siegel, candidate for Public Advocate, has been calling for a more open process of planning and has come out strongly against the use of eminent domain to promote new development.

Scott Stringer, candidate for Manhattan Borough President, recently released a series of recommendations for reforming Manhattan community boards. They include provision of a professional planner to each community board and greater support for the 197-a planning process, in which community boards can prepare plans and get them officially approved.

Putting Planning On The Agenda

The Community-based Planning Task Force has launched a campaign to get candidates to put community planning issues on their agendas for discussion in the campaign. Their recommendations are detailed in their report [Livable Neighborhoods for a Livable City](#) (in pdf format), and the candidates are being surveyed to see if they agree with the recommendations. They have not yet formally responded.

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Gotham Gazette is brought to you by [Citizens Union Foundation](#). It is made possible by a grants from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the Altman Foundation, the Fund for the City of New York, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, New York Times Foundation, the Charles H. Revson Foundation, the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and readers like you. Please consider making a [tax-deductible contribution](#).

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