



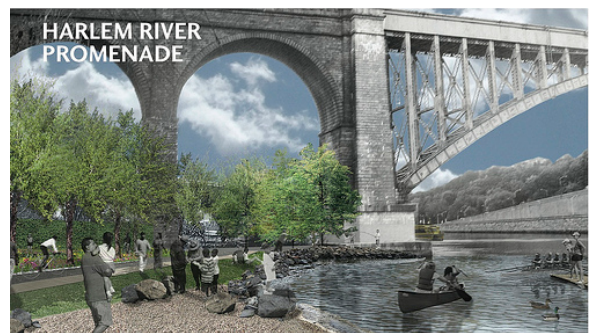
Hudson Valley Property Group

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Affordable Housing from Harlem's own Highline?

Could an entire wave of new affordable housing units soon come to uptown Manhattan? Considerations of a Highline-like project are in the works for Hamilton Heights, Harlem. The project, known as the Harlem Promenade, proposes an elevated park that would run over the Amtrak railroad line along the West Side Highway and provide the community connection to the Hudson River. Funding for the project would come from the sale of Amtrak's unused air rights in the area. The sale of the air rights could generate approximately \$170 million in revenue for the Harlem Promenade project and additional local projects.

Selling air rights to fund a community project is not a new idea. Similar initiatives have been done to fund Manhattan development projects such as Chelsea's High Line district and Midtown's theater district. What makes this idea unique is the target of the sale. Traditionally, air rights are sold for the development of profitable luxury condos and hotels. Daniel Cohen, a West Harlem resident and director of Real Estate Development at [Housing Partnership](#), a nonprofit that promotes affordable housing, proposed that the air rights be sold with a different purpose in mind. He proposes that the rights be used to develop over 2,000 new affordable housing units in West Harlem.



The zoning for this plan spans along Broadway from 123rd street, just above Columbia University's Morningside Campus until 158th street. Developers in this area would be required to set aside 50% of their units as affordable. In turn, they would be allowed to develop up to 16 story properties. This provides new opportunity for developers, as the existing zoning restricts buildings higher than 12 stories.

Eligibility for affordable housing is generally determined by the AMI, or area median income. The median income for Hamilton Heights residents is \$40,000, about half of other areas in Manhattan. This disparity raises the question of who is eligible for affordable housing. Is it those below the AMI for all of Manhattan, or for Hamilton Heights, Harlem? Cohen proposed that this project would allow for Harlem's area median income, so that local residents could most benefit from the development.

One other serious consideration for this project is Columbia's current expansion into this area for their Manhattanville campus. The new campus covers the area between 129th and 133rd streets spanning Broadway to Twelfth Avenue as well as three properties on the east side of Broadway from 131st to 134th streets. The project aims not only to expand the university's fast growing intellectual community, but also to integrate itself into the existing vibrant Harlem community. Included in its development is public access in many buildings, pedestrian friendly open spaces, and other community engagement initiatives.

So what effect could the significant increase of affordable housing have on the projected gentrification of this area in Harlem? Yuien Chin of the Hamilton Heights-West Harlem Community Preservation Organization argued that the possible increase of affordable housing would be undermining much of the rezoning already done for Columbia's project. "The community invested so much time in the rezoning process hoping it would protect the historic character of the neighborhood while allowing for some controlled growth in specific areas, so this news is disconcerting," she said in an article published by DNAinfo New York.

I argue the opposite. Increased affordable housing in the area could have quite a positive effect on the Manhattanville Campus and the surrounding area of Hamilton Heights. With a new campus comes opportunity for market rate housing filled by students, professors, and other campus professionals. "Housing prices have soared," said Mark Levine, the first-year councilman for the Manhattanville area in an interview with the Wall Street Journal. Apartments are now "renting for three times what longtime residents of the community can afford to pay"—and instead are being sold to Columbia affiliates. Longtime residents are losing in this equation, and are seeing a major impact on the affordability of their neighborhood.

Creating incentive for affordable housing, while it may call for a new round of rezoning discussions, ensures that the Hamilton Heights community remains affordable despite the anticipated gentrification. By creating buildings that are 50% affordable and 50% market rate, the strong intellectual Columbia community can better integrate into the vibrant Harlem community in a peaceful and organic way. The most successful affordable housing areas are ones that are integrated into highly developed areas. If zoned and executed properly, the Harlem Promenade project has the potential to complement Columbia's Manhattanville campus and overall create better opportunity and successful development in Harlem.

At this stage, the project is very much still an idea in the works. However, I think if executed with interests of both the existing low-income community and anticipated Ivy League community, the plan has the great potential for success among all parties.