

October 23, 2014

News | West Harlem

Nonprofit proposes Harlem Promenade, a plan for new affordable housing

By Aaron Fisher
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A new proposal by a housing nonprofit could lead to lead to 2,000 additional units of affordable housing in West Harlem.

The nonprofit organization Housing Partnership is proposing to transfer the air rights over Amtrak's rail lines along the West Side Highway to buildings along Broadway between 123rd and 158th streets to allow them to be built taller and with more units.

It also includes plans for a new park called Harlem Promenade between 137th and 140th streets, in a mostly empty valley between the train tracks and the existing Riverbank State Park.

According to Housing Partnership Vice President and Director of Real Estate Development Daniel Marks Cohen, the idea has been used elsewhere in New York City—in the Times Square area to build hotels and condominiums, and along the Chelsea High Line to build luxury housing.

He said that Housing Partnership, which has built about 30,000 units of affordable housing in New York over the past 30 years, is talking to real-estate developers in order to find a partner for the project.



Aaron Fisher for Spectator

PARK HERE | The nonprofit organization Housing Partnership's Harlem Promenade proposal plans to add 2,000 units of affordable housing along Broadway and a new park along the West Side Highway.

But there's one thing Cohen wants to make clear about his plan—it's not the High Line.

Air rights are underused space on top of existing buildings. Cohen noted that this strategy was used to transfer the air rights from the High Line in Chelsea in order to build luxury housing in that neighborhood.

"Everyone talks about the Harlem High Line," Cohen, vice president of the nonprofit Housing Partnership, said. "It really isn't the Harlem High Line."

He said that unlike in Chelsea, the new air rights would be used for affordable—rather than luxury—housing. He also points out that the current train tracks—which are used by around 20 Amtrak trains per day—would remain active, unlike the abandoned train tracks in Chelsea.

"Rather than build a new park, we are providing access to the existing Riverbank State Park," Cohen said. "We'd hope to landscape that whole valley."

According to Cohen, there are about a dozen sites—mostly buildings with businesses but not residents—along Broadway that could be turned into affordable housing. He added that he would work with the existing businesses to ensure that they successfully relocate.

Cohen also said that his organization is talking to local residents and politicians about the idea.

"We've met with all the elected officials in the area and most have expressed support," Cohen said.

District 7 City Council member Mark Levine, however, said that he's still waiting to take a final stance on the plan.

"I have a lot of questions and some concerns. I haven't taken a position on it yet for those reasons," Levine said. But "any proposal that has the potential of bringing thousands of new units of affordable housing at least deserves a fair hearing."

Cohen said that Housing Partnership plans to meeting with Community Board 9 in the near future, adding that as a member of CB9, he would recuse himself from a vote on the proposal.

West Harlem residents interviewed said, however, that they thought the project was a little ambitious.

Dane Burkett said that while he supports the plan to build affordable housing, "My major concern, just from my perspective, would be funding," he said.

Another resident, Rafael Garcia, said that he thought while the Harlem Promenade would benefit the neighborhood, he had more practical concerns about construction.

"I cannot guess how the neighbors would react," he said. "I suppose they would not be happy with the extra level of noise."