

# American Institute of Architects New York Chapter

GREENPOINT/ WILLIAMSBURG LAND USE AND WATERFRONT PLAN  
TESTIMONY  
April 4, 2005

Good afternoon Council Members, my name is Annie Kurtin, and I am here to testify in support of the proposed rezoning plan on behalf of the AIA New York Chapter, the founding Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, representing 3,880 architects, professional affiliates, and public members. I am also a resident of the Williamsburg community. The AIA New York Chapter has reviewed and strongly supports the proposed Greenpoint/ Williamsburg Land Use and Waterfront Plan that you have before you today, while making suggestion of how this excellent work could be improved. The plan and alternate plans were presented to the Chapter's Planning & Urban Design Committee and this testimony was developed by members of the Committee.

The Greenpoint/ Williamsburg Plan is a much-needed effort, well justified in terms of its regional and city-wide as well as local importance. The need for both market and affordable housing units is a city wide as well as local issue and where there is existing demand due to amenities or location, the City needs to take advantage of those economic forces. The Plan therefore allows for new residential development for a variety of income groups. It proposes leveraging this economic potential into a mechanism for creating waterfront amenities and housing subsidies. And it places an admirable emphasis on urban design and open space design that will attract new residential and commercial development and improve the quality of life for existing and new residents and workers.

The urban design/ zoning approach is carefully conceived and skillfully detailed. Placing high rise towers on the waterfront is a reasonable gesture in the context of the bigger scale afforded a riverfront location. New development will transcend the immediate neighborhood and participate in the city-wide skyline. We particularly like the concern for local context-- street frontage and building articulation. Suggestions for improvement include limiting the tower width facing the East River to one hundred feet, avoiding creation of a 'wall effect' along the water, as well as consideration of slightly lower tower heights in base 4.0 FAR, and greater variation in street wall heights. We thank the City Planning Commission for acknowledging our concern with regard to tower width facing the East River. However, in multi-block parcels where public open space is created, particularly when the tower is pulled back from the waterfront, occasional exceptions to this limitation should be permitted. Flexibility in tower location should be encouraged, moving towers inland to announce the intersections of parallel roads such as West Street with major perpendicular corridors is an especially critical gesture. Extending and landscaping these perpendicular corridors into the community will satisfy a valid community objective.

We applaud the Inclusionary Housing Provisions. In an era with limited Federal and State involvement in creating affordable housing, the City needs to do everything within its power to create more housing. Over the last few years we have supported expanding a modified Inclusionary Housing program to R6 through R9 districts throughout the City, This proposal accomplishes this at the local scale and we hope it

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is a first step to expanding the program city-wide, creating the potential for significant increases in permanent affordable housing units. This proposal breaks new ground in allowing a mix of low, moderate and middle income households and we applaud the efforts to use zoning as one tool to foster a mixed income future for Greenpoint/Williamsburg. As the proposal is refined it should encourage, but not mandate on-site development of such units. We support the proposal's optional nature: for some development, mandating inclusionary housing dependent on economics would prevent any development. Given the new ideas and untested nature of the proposal, we feel that at this time the mandatory approach proposed by others does not make sense.

The plan's density needs to match its accessibility. Many portions of the Greenpoint/Williamsburg waterfront have poor transit access, putting pressure on developments to provide extensive parking, which in turn can affect local and city wide circulation patterns. Transportation planning should have been included in the plan (the recent Hudson Yards project is an admirable precedent for such integrated transportation/land use planning). However, this missed opportunity can be fixed through an immediate program to coordinate transportation improvements—bus, ferry, subway—that can help mitigate this problem

A further concern is for the balance between new development and the amount of related open space amenity. Most recreation facilities and quantity of park space are located in Williamsburg, whereas Greenpoint has extensive need for its fair share of open space. A city-coordinated effort (possibly with state, federal, private and civic partners) is needed to add more or enhanced open space, such as at the Continental Iron Works site or Barge Park. Rather than put all of the burden on private developers to create the proposed esplanade (which would likely result in a intermittent development pace and interim disconnected sites) we encourage the city, along with transportation improvements, to coordinate a parallel open space implementation program. The Community Board has proposed an innovative bond program, tax increment financing approaches have been suggested, and we understand other civic groups are working on their own proposals. Relieving the developer of at least some of this economic burden can free up funds for affordable housing or other amenities and provide the community with more immediate results.

Development on the water is expensive. Between brownfields, bulkheading, poor soil conditions, building and maintaining the required public waterfront access, inclusionary housing, and above ground parking screened by other uses, the waterfront development proposed within the Waterfront Access Plan will be very expensive. Zoning through incentives and requirements can only do so much. We are concerned that we may be pushing the limits of what can be required or encouraged. A continuing careful look at what is feasible or prudent is therefore appropriate. But we also feel that the rewards are worth the risk, and that with additional future creative financing for open space and accessibility the Greenpoint/Williamsburg Waterfront can become a model for similar urban development. Approval of the thoughtful plan before you today is a major step in transforming an underutilized two mile stretch of our waterfront into a community resource for future generations.