

Community Voices and the Future of the

Seward Park Urban Renewal Area

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SPURA Matters is a yearlong initiative facilitated by several non-profit community organizations that wished to renew a community conversation about the redevelopment of the long-vacant Seward Park Urban Renewal Area (SPURA) site on the Lower East Side. Over several months in late 2008 and early 2009 and through different outreach methods, the initiative consulted with local stakeholders to engage them in a dialogue about community needs and potential uses for the site. After decades of controversial development proposals that never went anywhere, SPURA Matters strove to get local stakeholders talking about how the site could be developed in a way that benefits the surrounding community. The ultimate goal of the initiative is to help start a community-driven process to put the site back into a broadly productive use.

This report, prepared by the Pratt Center for Community Development, documents the findings from the SPURA Matters community engagement process and is intended to be used as a tool for local stakeholders to use in advocacy efforts to redevelop the SPURA site. Manhattan Community Board 3 is currently in the process of elaborating a set of principles for redevelopment, and the organizations that are part of SPURA Matters hope that this report can help guide that process.

Good Old Lower East Side (GOLES) spearheaded this initiative, but over the course of the community engagement process, the organizations listed below were active participants:

*Ana Luisa Garcia Community Center
Center for Urban Pedagogy
CHARAS-Tu Casa Sound Studio
City Lore
Cooper Square Committee
Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association
CAAHV
East Village Community Coalition
Grand Street Settlement
Hester Street Settlement
Immigrant Social Services*

*Indochina Sino-American Community Center
Jews for Racial and Economic Justice
Lower East Side Business Improvement District
Lower East Side People's Mutual Housing Association
Lower East Side Tenement Museum
St. Mary's Church
Two Bridges Neighborhood Council
University Settlement
Urban Justice Center*

Through public visioning workshops, a survey questionnaire, and an oral history project, the organizations that were part of SPURA Matters garnered the participation of local residents, business owners, and members of community organizations to talk about the future of the SPURA. From October 2008 to April 2009, over 250 people attended six public workshops, and over 300 people responded to a survey questionnaire.

Several major themes emerged from the public process facilitated by SPURA Matters:

Housing for Low and Moderate-Income Households

Across the board, housing for low and moderate-income households was the most popularly cited type of development that survey respondents and workshop participants would like to see on the SPURA site. Many reasons were given for the need to create this type of housing: to counter-balance the extreme gentrification that has been occurring in the area; so that immigrants and other low and moderate-income households could remain in the neighborhood; and so that their children and grandchildren could continue to live where they grew up.

While some workshop participants specifically mentioned that they do not favor any level of market-rate housing, a very significant amount of people (74% of survey respondents) who favor affordable housing indicated that they can support the creation of market-rate housing on the site as well if it can help offset its costs. Some participants preferred mixed-income housing on its own perceived merits (e.g., that is not ideal to concentrate people of similar economic backgrounds and that having households with a range of incomes is a good way to create a healthy community).

Mixed-Use Development

While housing (and affordable housing in particular) was a top goal for many stakeholders, there was no shortage of non-housing ideas for developing the SPURA site. The people who participated in the SPURA Matters outreach activities

(the survey and the workshops) seem to appreciate that a mix of uses helps create a thriving, healthy neighborhood, so they suggested a broad range of things—from movie theaters to retail stores to open space—that could complement housing on the site.

Community Facilities

Participants discussed the need to create community services and facilities of all types as part of new development. Many of them spoke of essential services such as day care that have been closing down in the Lower East Side. Others spoke of a strong need for seniors and young people to have access to recreational, cultural and educational activities.

Jobs for Local Residents

Stakeholders expressed that the creation of jobs for local residents is of major importance. Even before the current economic downturn, the number of jobs that were available to people of limited educational backgrounds was declining significantly. But now, jobs of all types are harder to find. As such, people want local residents to be able to benefit from the new jobs—both construction and post-construction—that the development of SPURA would generate.

The SPURA Matters initiative has shown that there is a strong local appetite for putting the SPURA site back into a use that includes housing as a large component. Many participants have expressed a strong desire for creating affordable housing, even if it requires the development of some level of market-rate housing to make it happen. In addition to housing, participants would also like to see community facilities and stores, as well as jobs, created from redeveloping the SPURA site.