

10 May 2010

Jersey City Council
City Hall
280 Grove Street
Jersey City, NJ 07302

VIA email to the City Clerk's Office

Re: Amendment to the Morris Canal Redevelopment Plan

To The Jersey City Council,

I am writing regarding a recent proposed amendment to the Morris Canal Redevelopment Plan, in an area now known as "TOD-South", part of the proposed "Transit-Oriented Development District" of the Plan Area. The provisions are primarily for properties along Suydam Street, currently a small industrial area in need of much redevelopment, BUT certain contiguous parcels also front Pine Street -- an intact, residential street characterized by small scale, 19th century architecture, including the historic A. Harry Moore House. A visit to the site will prove that the characters of the two streets are in stark contrast.

Whereas the gist of the proposed amendments promote commendable planning principles, our main issue of concern relates to the provisions regarding building height as they pertain to Pine Street: the amendments call for a minimum of four stories up to a maximum of eight stories in a small street primarily occupied by buildings no taller than three stories. Design standards allow for up to 12 feet of floor-to-ceiling height spaces (presumably for loft-style residential units), which if exercised, will exacerbate the height issue (because typical residential ceiling heights are only about eight to nine feet). If allowed to be built, the new building/s on Pine Street would be out of context with regards to scale and massing. In essence the amendment promotes development insensitive to the existing context of the street. The result goes against fundamental, sound planning principles, and is likely nothing but an oversight because it appears that much of the planning is focused on Suydam Street where the amendment actually recognizes the existing historic nature of some residential properties. But the amendment should have also recognized the differing characteristics of Pine and Suydam and the provisions should have reflected that. From a planning standpoint, it is reasonable to have differing design criteria for the two streets.

The neighborhood heard of the amendment provisions in the most recent meeting of the Morris Canal Redevelopment Area Development Coalition (MCRADC), the community empowerment group created by the Plan. Development proposals are supposed to be presented to MCRADC on its way to the Planning Board. However, in this particular instance, the amendments were presented at the May 6, 2010 meeting AFTER it was already heard and passed by the Planning Board on April 27, 2010. It had subsequently been introduced to the Council as its first reading. And, it is on the agenda of this

Wednesday's Council meeting for the second reading. At this point, I am simply and respectfully asking for the City Council to table the issue so that we get the chance to have a detailed and collaborative dialogue with the planning experts of the city. Clearly, the intent of the Plan to involve the community did not happen as we were brought to the table after the approval process was rolling. I hope that the Council will recognize how important this is, in terms of ensuring that new development gets done with sensitivity. The Pine Street parcels are but a small portion of the Plan area but for Pine Street itself, it represents a major swath of land and will be the biggest development on the block. The proposed provisions promote the design of a building that would overpower the character of the street -- this is not good.

A number of neighbors and I addressed these same concerns with the developer's representatives who fortunately enough, seemed receptive. I think they recognize that we are not taking an adversarial position on this matter - we simply want to get things done right and I hope that you would support us. They in turn suggested that we contact the Planning Department, which since Friday, I have. During the MCRADC meeting, the developer's representatives indicated that their project is still in the design phase. Under the circumstances, it would be prudent to seize this opportunity to address this issue before the building's design takes its final shape. And consider that as it is, even if the developer wishes to build only three stories on Pine Street to be in context with the neighboring buildings, he wouldn't be allowed because the requirements in question call for a minimum of four stories.

It doesn't appear that a postponement will be detrimental to the area's redevelopment. I hope that you would consider this simple request for the sake of 1) promoting good and sound development in the city, 2) preserving Pine Street's desirable qualities as an asset to Lafayette, and 3) rectifying the mishap in the system that denied the community its voice during the planning process.

Thank You.

Sincerely,

Lycel P. Villanueva, RA, PP, LEED AP
175 Pine Street
Jersey City, NJ 07304

cc: Bob Cotter, Planning; Claire Davis, Planning; Kristin Russell, Planning; Robert Byrne, City Clerk; June Jones, MCRADC; Beth diCara, LNAC