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Garodnick 'optimistic' over responses to long-awaited Midtown East plan



Councilman Dan Garodnick. | William Alatrisme for the New York City Council

By Khorri Atkinson

Councilman Daniel Garodnick played a crucial role almost three years ago in [sinking former Mayor Michael Bloomberg's ambitious rezoning plan](#) to erect taller buildings in Midtown East anchored by Grand Central Terminal, amid funding and pricing concerns.

But Friday, the councilman said a new version of the plan produced by a panel appointed by Mayor Bill de Blasio has finally addressed some key objections.

"The issues raised by stakeholders were accommodated in one form or the other in a way that allows what everyone needed to happen" to be implemented, Garodnick said at a breakfast forum of the New York Building Congress. "I'm optimistic about the response today. We want to strike the right balance for opportunities, growth and development."

[In late August](#), the Department of City Planning unveiled its second proposal to rezone the Midtown East business district by building taller buildings and increasing the current permitted maximum density by about 30 percent.

Carl Weisbrod, director of the Department of City Planning, who also chairs the Planning Commission, said Friday that the long-awaited plan would spur economic development in an area that is unappealing to modern tenants. He argued that it reflects the needs of today's market by providing office layouts that are trending toward being more open.

"The reality is that the nature of office and commercial office space is evolving, and we want to have the ability to produce a certain amount of office space for first-class multinational front office companies," said Weisbrod. "A lot of those companies want to be in a different kind of office style."

The city is seeking to rezone a 78-block area bounded by East 39th and East 57th Streets to the north and south, and Madison Avenue and Third Avenue to the east and west. The East Midtown Steering Committee, the panel de Blasio created and appointed Garodnick to lead, crafted the new proposal.

Garodnick and former Council Speaker Christine Quinn shut down Bloomberg's version of the plan in November 2013, which prevented the City Council from taking a vote. They took issue with the funding it required for infrastructure improvements and the price of air rights.

Days after his mayoral victory, when lawmakers failed to reach a decision, de Blasio applauded them "for pressing the pause button in order to ensure these concerns are adequately addressed." He promised to revise the proposal.

The current plan is [far less ambitious than Bloomberg's](#) and it has received support of some key elected officials, including Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer, who served as the committee's co-chair. It is spearheaded by the Department of City Planning and is making its way through the bureaucratic land use approval process known as ULURP.

A core part of the plan, which Weisbrod and Garodnick called a big win, would allow owners of landmarked buildings in the area to sell air rights across the district, rather than just adjacent to their properties, as currently permitted. And building owners who want to erect larger buildings, at maximum allowable densities, could fund public infrastructure, including transportation improvements, instead of purchasing costly air rights.

"We don't really need to drag the MTA into a process where the city is developing a mechanism [and] that we need funds [to carry out]. We have an opportunity to do things in Midtown that the MTA has on its list ... but it not their highest-priority items," said Garodnick, whose Council district overlaps with most of the proposed rezoning plan.

The Council typically defers to the local member in land use decisions.

"Should the MTA pay for all the things related to MTA work? Yes," he said. "Can they do that today, where we spend half the year thinking about the \$15 billion hole in their \$32 billion budget? No. The idea that we have to wait five to 10 minutes to get out of a subway station in Midtown because it's so congested, we have an ability to fix that."

Weisbrod said the proposed Midtown air rights buying model was not in the 2013 version, but that it's more feasible for the market.

"Development value square foot on Park Avenue and 53rd street is a lot different from the value square foot elsewhere in the city," he said.

The planning documents, also called a draft scope of work, show that the city predicts the rezoning would yield 16 towers and 6.6 million square feet of new office space, accommodating 26,507 workers. The area now has approximately 70 million square feet of office space, and of the more than 475 buildings, over 300 are at least five decades old.