



## **FULFILLING THE PROMISE OF MANHATTAN'S FAR WEST SIDE**

A Regional Plan Association Position Paper

{ July 2004 }

## FOREWORD

RPA envisions the growth of a new, 21st Century business district on the Far West Side of Midtown Manhattan— a 24/7 mixed-use neighborhood that emphasizes office development but includes significant residential, retail and entertainment uses. Its modern buildings are environmentally-friendly and nurture a tapestry of activities, with office space, housing units, retail and nightlife activities woven tightly together. It is a place with grand new public open spaces that draw its residents, workers and visitors to the great Hudson River waterfront that defines its western edge.

The City and State of New York have put forward an ambitious proposal aimed at realizing this vision. Over the last year, RPA has undertaken an intense assessment of the City-State proposal in the context of the region's needs and outlook. In the process, RPA has studied several current and past alternative plans, including the visions for the Far West Side that RPA articulated in each of its three regional plans. The effort also included analyses of current trends, future projections and critical issues, much of which were articulated in three RPA research papers addressing development, transportation and design issues.

As important as the research, however, has been an extensive dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders and experts. Throughout this process, the plan's supporters, including City and State officials, the New York Jets and NYC2012, have been open and accessible. Their willingness to clarify and debate elements of the plan have certainly improved it and provided considerable opportunities for public discussion. Numerous meetings with public officials, civic and academic observers, and both proponents and opponents of the plan culminated in RPA's Regional Assembly on April 16, 2004. More than 600 participants heard and debated a range of views on the Hudson Yards plan, the RPA research papers and alternative visions for the district.

In the months before and after the Regional Assembly, RPA's 56-member Board of Directors engaged in a dialogue with the RPA staff far

more extensive than Board participation on any other issue in memory. The Board represents the region's great diversity of professions, places and interests, and naturally includes a broad range of opinions on any topic. In the course of the Board's discussions, several Board members expressed the view that the City's plan had been prepared as a package and the concern that removing any single element could put the whole effort at risk and jeopardize this unique opportunity to develop the Far West Side. Others strongly supported certain aspects of the City's plan that RPA opposes, most notably the proposed New York Sports and Convention Center. In keeping with 80 years of tradition, at the end of this process the Board broadly supported the release of this Regional Plan Association position paper.

Even after a year of research, this paper has gone through several iterations and has been modified based on input from the City and the RPA Board of Directors, and a review of the Environmental Impact Statement released in June. The paper articulates the principles and objectives that shape RPA's recommendations. The Hudson Yards plan reflects a particular set of values and priorities that determine how the City and State weigh the potential benefits and risks of different policy choices. Similarly, RPA's vision for the Far West Side is rooted in development priorities that reflect our mission of promoting the long-term prosperity of New York City and the region. RPA's goal is to inform the public on this critical debate and promote further dialogue with the City, the State and the public to achieve the best possible outcome for the citizens of New York City and the metropolitan region.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Regional Plan Association strongly supports redevelopment of the Far West Side with the density and mixed-use character proposed by the City and State of New York. This underutilized area represents the region's best opportunity to create a new 24/7 district in the region's central core that can grow with an evolving 21st Century economy. Our vision emanates from development principles that have guided RPA throughout its history and from our economic priorities for the future. These principles and priorities lead RPA to oppose construction of the New York Sports and Convention Center and support a phased strategy that implements much of the City's plan on a revised timetable. Most successful redevelopment plans are altered and revised several times before implementation, and this plan must be flexible enough to incorporate changes if it is to succeed.

### Development Principles and Priorities

RPA's core development principle is that the entire region benefits when high-density, high-value development is located in the region's urban core and in transit-accessible suburban centers.

- For the Far West Side and other locations within the urban core, public policies should encourage office activities, high-density residential development, and civic, cultural and entertainment functions that have a clear need for a central location.
- The Far West Side needs to be developed in a manner that enhances the success of existing and emerging commercial centers.
- The proposed uses for the Far West Side should maximize the value of the waterfront, one of New York City's most underutilized resources.
- The district needs to make the best possible connections to the region's transit network, to enhance both prospects for success and benefits for the rest of the region.

The Far West Side also needs to be considered in the context of regional priorities. The goal

of creating new office districts to allow for future expansion of the economy is only one of three critical development priorities, each of which has a momentum of its own and could be affected by the plan for the Far West Side:

- The region's transit network has almost no capacity for growth into and within the Central Business District (CBD), and funding for both maintaining and expanding the system are very much in doubt. Plans for development of new office districts on the Far West Side and in other parts of the City will be greatly impeded without essential projects to expand transit capacity, such as the Second Avenue Subway and a new Trans-Hudson passenger rail tunnel. Accelerating office development without increasing transit capacity will only add to congestion that could hinder overall growth for the city and region. The proposed #7 extension may be essential to the development of the district, but adds no new capacity into or within the CBD.
- Housing availability and affordability are persistent impediments to both economic growth and social equity. While addressing the need for housing should not be the primary goal of the West Side plan, the district can make important near-term contributions to both market-rate and subsidized housing.
- Existing and emerging commercial centers in other parts of the region need to be strengthened along with the Far West Side. Development of the district must be carefully coordinated with the recovery of Lower Manhattan and plans for expanded centers in the outer boroughs, northern New Jersey and elsewhere.

### Immediate Actions, Long-Term Flexibility

The region's challenge is to capitalize on the momentum created by the Hudson Yards plan to advance all of these larger objectives. This requires immediate action to launch an incremental

westward expansion of Midtown that will proceed over several decades in tandem with development in other parts of the city and the region.

While there is an urgency to get started, there is a danger in rushing projects that will impede the flexibility of both the district and the region to adapt to changing market conditions. In the near term, there is less urgency to create new office space than there is to address a critical housing shortage and a long delayed modernization of the transit network. Vacant space, planned construction and identified development sites should give Manhattan enough office space to accommodate expected demand until well into the next decade. However, without opening the Far West Side for development, New York City will eventually be unable to meet growing commercial demand, even if the timing, strength and character of this market is impossible to predict.

To meet this challenge, RPA supports a phased implementation of most of the elements of the Hudson Yards plan that will maximize benefits and minimize risks for economic growth, the City's fiscal outlook, the region's transportation system and the recovery of Lower Manhattan. Specifically, this strategy would unfold as follows:

### Phase I: 2004-2009

**1. Proceed immediately with rezoning and public realm improvements to allow the district to respond to market demands.** By implementing the rezoning plan for the Far West Side, the district can immediately take advantage of the great demand for residential development in areas that are currently served by transit and facilitate redevelopment west of Eighth Avenue. The public review process should explore ways to improve the flexibility of the zoning, but this should not impede approval in early 2005. In addition to the rezoning, highly visible and relatively low cost investments in public spaces, streetscapes and open space can encourage this transformation. Development, which could also include some office construction, is likely to

proceed mostly along east-west corridors and east of Tenth Avenue.

**2. Expand the Javits Center.** The first phase of the northern expansion of the Javits Center will attract more conventions and trade shows that will bring out-of-town visitors to the region and its hotel rooms and restaurants. The design of the Javits Center should be modified to add more pedestrian-friendly spaces at its fringes and potentially bridge over the highway to connect to Hudson River Park.

### **3. Design a mixed-use alternative for the Western Rail Yards site that will draw residents, visitors and office workers to the Hudson River waterfront.**

While much attention has been focused on the potential merits or problems of the proposed New York Sports and Convention Center (NYSCC), the real question is whether it is the best use of this critical piece of waterfront property. RPA opposes development of the NYSCC because the facility represents a suboptimum use of a site that is key to the long-term development of the district. There is no compelling need to place this in a part of the city that should be devoted to high-value, high-density office and residential development. Its construction is in conflict with the district's overall goals, and will stifle its long-term potential by limiting waterfront access, adding congestion and looming over the adjacent streets and Hudson River Park. Fortunately, the alternative is not simply a choice between the NYSCC or an open rail yard.

The City and State should immediately pursue an alternative use that would catalyze the next phase of development. With public investments comparable to those proposed for the NYSCC, there should be strong market demand on the site for private development. This location is ideally suited for high-density residential development that would take advantage of its waterfront location and Manhattan's persistent demand for new housing locations. The design should include

public open spaces, walkways and connections to Hudson River Park that will draw city residents, office workers and tourists to the western edge of the district. New residents and visitors should spur the development of restaurants, shops and cafes and the City can actively recruit cultural and community uses to further attract activity without the negative impacts imposed by the NYSCC.

In this initial phase, the Yards should be re-zoned for high-density mixed use and included in the overall zoning package currently being reviewed. A master plan should then be designed for study in the final EIS, due to be completed in the coming year.

## Phase II: 2010-2015

**1. Complete the first leg of the #7 subway extension.** Investment in transportation access is the single most important action for spurring commercial development west of Tenth Avenue. Extending the #7 to a new station at 34th Street and 11th Avenue will build on the momentum of the first phase and trigger a more intensive westward expansion of the district. This schedule will give Lower Manhattan an additional five years to recover before it begins to compete with office projects on the Far West Side. It will also help limit the fiscal risk by allowing some initial development and further analysis of financing plans before major investments are made. Finally, it will allow time for construction to begin on the transit expansion projects that are vital to the success of the new district and the growth of the regional economy.

**2. Complete public investments in the Eastern and Western Rail Yards and open space network.** These investments will provide development sites, open space and other amenities that should pave the way for development of a dense, mixed-use district on the western edge of midtown. It will open up the southern corridor of the

district with unimpeded access to the Hudson River. Public investments in infrastructure on both the Eastern and Western Yards at the beginning of this phase would allow for initial development on both sites before 2015.

**3. Complete the second phase of the northern expansion of the Javits Center.** Assuming continued growth in the convention market, this will further strengthen the region's competitiveness for exhibition and trade shows.

## Phase III: 2016 – 2020

**1. Deck the Lincoln Tunnel “spaghetti” infrastructure.** Building over the exposed Port Authority infrastructure that snakes through the redevelopment area will remove a major barrier to the natural westward development of the district. While the actual covering and development is not anticipated for a decade, the City and Port Authority should complete their discussions to reach an agreement on how this action can be implemented. More aggressive measures may be needed to prioritize mitigation of this blight in the heart of the Far West Side.

**2. Construct the second phase of the #7 subway extension.** The 41st Street station of the #7 extension would be built in this period. Along with decking the Lincoln Tunnel infrastructure, this will allow for office development in the northern portion of the district in the later years of the build-out period.

## Comparative Advantages and Risks

Every strategy entails inherent advantages and risks. The strategy proposed by the City and the State seeks to capitalize on broad support for a 2012 Olympic bid, a willing investor in the New York Jets, and the need for an expanded Javits Center to spur rapid approval of zoning and

infrastructure investments. It is hoped that this “sports and convention corridor” will generate immediate economic and fiscal benefits and become a magnet for pedestrian life and retail activity that catalyze commercial development, primarily between 10th and 11th Avenues.

Supporters of the City’s plan fear that attempts to substantially revise it could doom the entire effort, leaving the district undeveloped for decades. Some observers have suggested that the elements of the plan were designed as a coherent whole, and that elimination, delay or modification of any of these components would require a rethinking of the entire plan. Others are concerned that the plan would lose important political support among key constituencies if some elements, such as the New York Sports and Convention Center, were dropped.

RPA believes that its recommendations will make redevelopment of the Far West Side more likely rather than less. These recommendations substantially accept the elements of the Hudson Yards plan other than the New York Sports and Convention Center and the timing of the infrastructure investments. The projected economic benefits for the NYSCC are based on assumptions for the highly unpredictable convention business, and both stadia and convention centers frequently fail to live up to the claims of their proponents. These types of facilities have not attracted the type of large-scale office development elsewhere, and are unlikely to do so on the Far West Side. The NYSCC is also by far the most controversial element of the plan, and its removal would increase support for the plan as a whole.

A different phasing strategy and alterations to the plan should also not impede its realization. History suggests that large scale redevelopment projects, such as Battery Park City or Times Square, generally progress through several iterations before they are implemented. In fact, flexibility and adaptation are essential ingredients to any successful plan.

RPA’s proposed alternative also has risks. The

proposal assumes that rezoning, infrastructure investments and gradual westward development will generate sufficient demand for predominantly residential mixed-use development of the Western Rail Yards, with a strong open space component. If it proves difficult to attract sufficient private interest in the Yards, then development of the district could be impeded. However, the City’s entire plan is predicated on generating private development through zoning and infrastructure. There is no reason to believe that these forces would be any less likely to develop the Western Yards than the Eastern yards site or the proposed mid-block boulevard between 10th and 11th avenues. In fact, the waterfront location of the site should enhance its attractiveness.

Another risk is that, if the City’s economy expands very rapidly over the next decade, then the proposed phasing of the infrastructure investments could limit City employment growth in the 2010-2015 period. However, this level of growth is unlikely, and the risk is minimal compared to the potential for seriously impeding Lower Manhattan’s recovery with the current phasing strategy.

The strategy described in this paper is intended to maximize the strengths and minimize the risks of the Hudson Yards proposal. The rezoning and infrastructure investments are the keys to the birth of a dynamic new mixed-use district on the Far West Side. The proposed revisions will make the most of the district’s waterfront location and build greater flexibility into both the timing and character of development. They will also help insure that development of the Far West Side proceeds in tandem with recovery and growth in other parts of the region. The tremendous City-State effort provides the vehicle for realizing the potential of the Far West Side, and we must now take advantage of this unique opportunity with the best possible plan.

### Acknowledgements

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Regional Plan Association (RPA) is an independent regional planning organization that improves the quality of life and the economic competitiveness of the 31-county New York-New Jersey-Connecticut region through research, planning, and advocacy. Since 1922, RPA has been shaping transportation systems, protecting open spaces, and promoting better community design for the region's continued growth. We anticipate the challenges the region will face in the years to

come, and we mobilize the region's civic, business, and government sectors to take action. RPA's current work is aimed largely at implementing the ideas put forth in the Third Regional Plan, with efforts focused in five project areas: community design, open space, transportation, workforce and the economy, and housing. For more information about Regional Plan Association, please visit our website, [www.rpa.org](http://www.rpa.org).

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