In April, the State Legislature approved a modified version of Governor Hochul’s plan to vastly increase the allowable size and density of residential development in NYC. The measure lifted a more than 60-year-old limit on the allowable size of residential development in the city, albeit with a few guardrails added. The new extra-dense zoning the state enabled, which would allow extra-large developments in NYC, can’t be applied in historic districts, or on sites with artist live-work units and certain kinds of affordable housing. Additionally, some measures were added to try to prevent tenants from being harassed to make way for the extra-large developments the new rules would enable, and the new supersized developments had to include about one-quarter income-restricted housing — though those “restrictions” could allow incomes well above the median for NYC.

While the compromise version was better than the unconditional lift the Governor proposed, and elected officials like the Mayor, Borough President Levine, and City Councilmembers Bottcher and Rivera lobbied for, it was still a blow to our neighborhoods, and based on the false premise that such changes would make our city more affordable and more equitable.

With the new state limits on the allowable size of development gone, Mayor Adams wasted no time integrating into his new “City of Yes for Housing Opportunity” plan (now going through the public approval process) proposed extra-large zoning districts allowing buildings 25–50% larger than the old limit allowed. Additionally, his plan would strip away many longstanding zoning protections for our neighborhoods, allowing new luxury condo developments to go bigger and taller than previously allowed, and to enable air rights transfers to extend much more broadly throughout our neighborhoods than currently permitted, with little oversight or approval needed.

All of these measures we’re seeing proposed and implemented at the city and state level are based on the notion that building more affordable housing will help make New York City more affordable. We’ve debunked that highly flawed but pervasive theory (see article on page 4), and are fighting to prevent the harmful elements of the Mayor’s plan from gaining approval.
Earlier this year, a bill was introduced in the State Legislature that would override landmark protections for religious edifices — some of our city’s most historically significant sites — to allow development there even when zoning regulations or landmarks protections would otherwise prohibit it. Misleadingly named the “Faith-Based Affordable Housing Act,” the bill would actually enable construction of luxury condos and commercial development as well. In its original form, the vaguely worded legislation would have allowed demolition of some of our city’s most important landmarks. The bill garnered huge support within the legislature, including from our two local state senators, and a vigorous campaign to secure its passage was led by a real estate front group that seeks to eliminate landmark and zoning protections.

For a while, the bill looked poised to secure passage as part of the state budget deal in April. Prior to that, we waged a campaign to get legislators to drop support for the bill until and unless its many very serious flaws were fixed. The bill ultimately failed to secure inclusion in the budget. Under pressure from us and other opponents, the main Senate sponsor amended the bill to fix some, but far from all, of the problems. The Assembly bill remains in its original deeply problematic form. While we remain open to working with religious institutions to find ways to address their very real needs and concerns regarding use of their properties, this bill throws the baby out with the bathwater to (ostensibly) give religious institutions more flexibility than current rules allow.

PROTECTING THE MERCHANT’S HOUSE MUSEUM

Village Preservation has many concerns about a planned development approved by the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) next door to the Merchant’s House Museum (MHM) at 27 East 4th Street, a development we have long opposed. MHM asserts that the construction next door will damage its historic structure, particularly its landmarked, incredibly delicate interior plasterwork that was damaged in prior years by work next door.

While the LPC put in place a much stricter set of requirements than usual for the work to guard against damage to the museum from the construction next door, the agreement the LPC arrived at still leaves ambiguities in many key areas regarding monitoring and enforcement. All the requirements in the world won’t mean anything without proper oversight and swift follow-up — something city agencies have consistently failed to do with multiple other construction projects in our neighborhoods.

Village Preservation has demanded greater clarity from the city about oversight plans here. In response, we’ve been added to the list of parties who will be immediately notified if vibration levels at the construction site exceed proscribed levels. We will continue to closely monitor the situation, and to work closely with our friends at the beloved Merchant’s House Museum — a public institution on city-owned land that is an irreplaceable cultural asset and a national treasure benefiting thousands of New Yorkers with its educational programs each year. Any work that would force the museum’s closure or damage it in any way would hurt the public first and foremost, and undermine the investment of millions of public dollars in this historic educational institution over the years.
Mayor Adams has made “Get Stuff Built” his administration’s mantra. As we’ve pointed out, perhaps he should focus more on “keeping stuff standing” and enforcing the law, as unsafe work and landmarks and building violations have become increasingly common in our neighborhoods.

Among the most egregious examples have been the six jointly owned early 19th-century landmarked buildings at 14-18 Gay Street and 16-20 Christopher Street. Illegal work there resulted in demolition of the treasured 14 Gay Street (the inspiration for My Sister Eileen and Wonderful Town) while the other five buildings remain in perilous condition. We were outraged to discover that virtually no penalties were being levied for illegal work there and the destruction it wrought, nor for the ongoing dangerously deteriorated conditions of the remaining properties. We’ve pressured the city to act, and enlisted local elected officials to do the same.

At both 829 Greenwich Street (Horatio Street) and 188 Spring Street (Thompson Street), we’ve received disturbing reports of what appears to be unpermitted work that extends beyond either what approvals allow or the property line in these landmarked areas, deeply concerning neighboring residents and owners. We have called upon city agencies to investigate and take swift action as needed.

At 105-107 Bank Street (Greenwich Street), we reported that a developer had removed the entire interior and rear walls of two landmarked early 19th-century townhouses where John Lennon and Yoko Ono once lived, in violation of landmarks permits that only allowed more limited demolition and alteration (the developer had asked for but not received permission for the more complete demolition undertaken). We immediately reported the flagrant violation, expecting decisive enforcement action by the city. Instead, over our vociferous protests, the city considered this a minor deviation from approved plans, and outrageously didn’t impose any penalty on the developer.

Village Preservation has also been very busy pursuing enforcement action for some of the more egregious illegal signage and other exterior violations in our neighborhoods.

We were able to get city agencies to issue violations for the Coney Island–like “Pizza Funhouse” signage illegally erected at 65 West 8th Street (Sixth Avenue), and nearby at 465 Sixth Avenue (West 11th Street), violations were issued for installing an unpermitted storefront including signage and lighting in this landmarked area. At 225 West 4th Street (Sheridan Square) and 529 Broome Street (Sullivan Street) we got similar violations issued for illegal illuminated signage (“Little Ruby’s” and “Kushie Punch,” respectively) on landmarked buildings, and at 400 West 14th Street (Ninth Avenue) a multistory installation on a landmarked building was removed after we reported it and violations were issued.

Ensuring appropriate enforcement of landmarks and buildings codes helps maintain the special character of neighborhoods, and in some cases is essential to prevent damage both to the buildings where work is being done and to neighboring structures.
In May, we released an in-depth analysis of the theory underlying so many of the measures coming out of City Hall and Albany right now — that our city’s increasingly unaffordable housing prices are due to a lack of supply, and that simply building more housing, regardless of how expensive, will bring prices down for everyone.

The city and other advocates for loosening regulations to allow bigger, taller, and denser market-rate housing development in our neighborhoods have long claimed it’s necessary because we’re not producing enough housing, and housing production is not keeping up with population growth. The city further claims that shrinking household sizes have exacerbated this problem, resulting in the same number of people requiring even more units of housing. As they tell it, this has coincided with, and caused, the big increase in housing costs in NYC over the last several decades.

We looked at the numbers ourselves. What we found was quite revealing.

Upzoning proponents got one thing right — housing prices have risen dramatically in NYC over the last several decades, making housing less and less affordable to more and more New Yorkers. But they were wrong about virtually everything else, including their claim as to why this occurred.

An analysis of the amount of housing and the population in NYC from 1960 to the present shows the former has steadily risen even as the latter has ebbed and flowed. Most importantly, the rate of increase of housing units has not only kept up with population growth, it’s exceeded it, especially in the last few years, giving the city far and away its best ratio of housing units to people over the last six-plus decades. And while household size did drop between 1960 and 1980, so did the population of New York City (by almost a million people), and since 1980 the average household size in the city has actually increased, thereby lowering the per capita demand for housing (larger household sizes mean fewer housing units are needed for the same number of people).

All this undermines the contention that how much housing we’re building determines our housing costs — if it did, housing costs in the city would have held steady over the last 60 years, or decreased slightly. But they haven’t. And just producing more unaffordable housing, as the city’s and state’s plans will do, won’t change that.

Since 2000, about a half-million new units of housing have been built in New York City, by far mostly unaffordable to the majority of New Yorkers. At the same time, we’ve lost hundreds of thousands of affordable housing units (which were either demolished or are no longer affordable), and our housing construction costs are among the highest in the world. These factors are among the reasons why our housing prices are so high, and keep increasing. And building more, bigger, and denser unaffordable housing, as the city and state propose, won’t help, and may hurt, in more ways than one.

We also undercut the claim that neighborhoods like Greenwich Village and the East Village aren’t providing enough housing. Our analysis showed these neighborhoods are among the densest, not only in New York City but the world, often 10 times or more denser with housing than other neighborhoods across the city.

MORE INFO villagepreservation.org/shortage-unaffordability
CITY IGNORES PUBLIC INPUT FOR 388 HUDSON STREET

In April, the city issued its final “Community Visioning” report for the planned affordable housing development at 388 Hudson Street (Clarkson Street) on city-owned land formerly earmarked for a park. The document is intended to guide proposals from private developers to build here. As expected, it reflected the deck-stacking that characterized the “public engagement” process from the beginning, and minimized the overwhelming public input received about plans for the site.

In 2021, the city earmarked this publicly owned vacant site for the construction of 100 units of affordable housing. We and others embraced this possibility. Then in 2023, plans began to emerge for doubling, tripling, or more the size of the planned development on the site. Upon questioning, mechanisms for ensuring the development would be required to remain affordable in perpetuity didn’t exist, and the city’s preference was for a tall slender tower that would be Greenwich Village’s tallest ever, looming over both the adjacent JJ Walker Park and the Greenwich Village Historic District. VP and others called for a lower, squatter building that would maximize housing while minimizing height, would set back from JJ Walker Park to minimize shadows and visual impact, would match the height of the larger surrounding loft buildings (as opposed to rising to two to three times the height), and would require nothing less than permanent affordability.

More than 1,500 New Yorkers wrote the city demanding similar measures as part of the “community visioning” process. The city responded by initially refusing to even acknowledge these issues or the huge public outcry around them, including almost no mention of them in the initial draft “community visioning” document. After significant pushback from Village Preservation, the city added nominal mentions of the calls for the changes we described, but still dedicated by far the majority of the document to issues like the size of windows and the color of brick, failing to reflect what most of the engaged public said it wanted. The city still has not committed to any mechanism that would guarantee permanent affordability, nor has it made any concessions regarding the height, size, or configuration of the tower to relate to community context or protect the park. This document will now be sent to potential developers to guide the proposals they will submit for the site, which will require a public review and approval process.

PROGRESS AGAINST 32-FT.-TALL 5G TOWERS

We were thrilled to secure rulings earlier this year from the NYS Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) agreeing with our contention that multiple planned oversized 5G towers in the West Village, on Greenwich, West, Horatio, Gansevoort, and West 12th Streets, would have a negative impact upon area historic resources, thus putting a brake on the process of their being sited in our neighborhoods.

As a result, the company behind the structures dropped their plans for several of them, but has held firm on pursuing those on Horatio and West 12th Streets (at Washington Street), appealing the SHPO’s decision. We’re glad to report the SHPO has held firm in its opposition.

The story isn’t over. The West Village towers are on hold until this process is completed, but the SHPO decision is being appealed to the Federal Communications Commission, which has the final word here. And more towers are expected to be planned for our neighborhoods in the future. We have been working with fellow preservation and community groups to try to get the city to undertake a redesign of the structures to make them less intrusive — ideally utilizing existing lampposts and street furniture — and are working hard to try to ensure the towers are not sited in locations in our neighborhoods where they are not actually needed.
NEW ORAL HISTORY
AND PLAQUE

In February, we released our latest oral history, with renowned historian, author, playwright, artist, and activist Jonathan Ned Katz. Katz grew up a “red diaper baby” in the Village in the 1940s, and in the 1970s his book *Gay American History* helped found the field of LGBTQ+ history as well as the scholarly study of sexual communities. Katz’s history joins our nearly 70 other oral histories, with figures from Jane Jacobs to Jonas Mekas, Merce Cunningham to Mimi Sheraton, John Guare to Joan Davidson. Check out villagepreservation.org/oralhistory.

In May we unveiled our 24th plaque marking the former home and studio of ground-breaking photographer and artist Saul Leiter at 111 East 10th Street. Leiter not only created his stunning polychromatic images here, but projected them on the wall of his building and drew inspiration from his East Village surroundings. We were joined by hundreds of Leiter fans along with art critic Vince Aletti and the Saul Leiter Foundation. This plaque joins our others honoring James Baldwin, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Allen Ginsberg, Charles Mingus, Frank O’Hara, Frank Stella, Martha Graham, and Lorraine Hansberry, among others. Explore them all at villagepreservation.org/historic-plaques.

WEST VILLAGE WATERFRONT IN THE EARLY 1990S

This May we released our latest historic image archive collection, capturing the West Village Waterfront and Meatpacking District in the early 1990s. Longtime resident John Krawchuk took the images as part of a Columbia University historic preservation thesis, examining the neighborhood on the cusp of change as Hudson River Park was taking shape, the High Line south of Gansevoort Street was being dismantled, and high-rises were beginning to go up. The images show an array of sites, some since landmarked and preserved, others lost in the development rush that came soon after.

Krawchuk also donated his 134-page study of the history, present, and recommendations for a potential future for the area. It’s a fascinating snapshot of the thinking at the time about how best to preserve and sustain a neighborhood in tremendous flux, which helped inform many of the successful preservation efforts by Village Preservation that followed. See the entire collection at villagepreservation.org/krawchuk.

VILLAGE INDEPENDENT DEMOCRATS ARCHIVE

We have painstakingly digitized the archives of local political club Village Independent Democrats (VID) from its beginnings in 1955 to 1969. VID changed the course of local and New York City history and politics, taking on and eventually dismantling the local Tammany Hall machine; launching the careers of Ed Koch and Carol Greitzer; and campaigning for civil rights, historic preservation, removing cars from Washington Square, ending Robert Moses’ bulldozing plans, and much more.

Our digitized VID archive includes everything from press clippings to campaign literature, reports on civil rights, strategy sessions on fighting Robert Moses, and more. You’ll see figures from Eleanor Roosevelt to Robert Kennedy to Martin Luther King Jr. Learn how these local battles played out in real time with this extensive online archive containing a treasure trove of materials. This is one of many historic collections Village Preservation has digitized and made available to the public, including that of the West Village Committee (founded by Jane Jacobs) and the “Manhattan Promenade,” an early proposal to save and transform the High Line into a park, nearly a quarter-century before that became a reality. Find the full archive at villagepreservation.org/vid-collection-55-69.
FROM THE DIRECTOR
ANDREW BERMAN

This May, we once again staged our Annual Benefit House Tour, a cherished spring tradition for over 25 years. In spite of some slightly damp weather, it was a joyous opportunity to explore six wonderful historic homes that exemplified the creativity, charm, and unique appeal of our neighborhoods. We were incredibly grateful to the New York Studio School for serving as the starting point, NYU’s Grey Art Museum for hosting the post-tour reception, and Jon Posner and Udie Eliasi of Compass Real Estate for allowing us to set up a special “pop up” in the former Village Cigars for the day.

And in June we’re celebrating six amazing people and places at our Annual Meeting and Village Awards at Cooper Union’s Great Hall. This year, with music legend Lenny Kaye as emcee, we’re honoring the Bus Stop Cafe at 597 Hudson Street, playwright Barbara Kahn, the Sixth Street Community Center, performance artist Penny Arcade, Trash & Vaudeville at 96 East 7th Street, and the Washington Square Park Conservancy. As always, the awardees and the evening are inspiring.

Hopefully, like me, you continue to find inspiration in all we do, and all there is to celebrate and preserve in our neighborhoods.

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