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Pondering the City's land use process

BY Kristin Shiller

“Is the city's land use process in need of reform?”

That question was the focus of last Wednesday's “Land Use and Local Voices” panel discussion, co-sponsored by Community Board 1 and the Municipal Art Society. Over 400 guests attended the event and packed Pace University's Michael Schimmel Center for the Arts to listen in and join the discussion. The question, however, was largely answered even before the conference began with a resounding “yes.”

Vin Cipolla, president of the Municipal Art Society, said that New York City's land use process does indeed need to be reevaluated and remarked that Wednesday's event would be “likely to provide more questions than answers.”

“Part of our role at M.A.S. is to keep a spotlight on these issues,” he said. “We're hearing today the many reasons why this evaluation is necessary... We want to take some responsibility for framing a land use discussion.”

Julie Menin, chair of Community Board 1, agreed, referring to the panel as an opportunity to “candidly discuss U.L.U.R.P.,” which is shorthand for Uniform Land Use Review Procedure. The need to reform U.L.U.R.P. is an issue that has been on Ms. Menin's mind for several years now. When the charter revision came out earlier this year, she asked C.B. 1 to create a resolution regarding U.L.U.R.P. reform. Wednesday's conference grew out of this desire to promote more discussion about reform.

Many of the panel guests, a collection of esteemed planners, lawyers, academics and community advocates, shared Ms. Menin sentiments. They brought a rich base of knowledge and experience to the conversation and highlighted examples from other cities, such as Denver, Portland, and Seattle.

A number of the participants bemoaned New York City's lack of a comprehensive plan, the absence of which makes the City a rarity among the nation's metropolitan areas. David Kinsey of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University noted that the old adage, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there," is certainly not the best way to run a city.

Similarly, Michael Slattery, senior vice president for research at the Real Estate Board of New York, pointed out that the City "can't grow without guidance" and posed the question "What can we do to welcome growth?"

Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer echoed the need to plan for growth, referring to New York as a "magnet city that attracts people from all over the world," with likely one million more on the way.

Mr. Stringer also spoke strongly about the need to reform the City's community boards. With the success of 311, he noted, the boards no longer have to spend as much time with service delivery and can turn their attention towards planning.

"Community boards should go back to their original mission. They should become community planning boards and have a mandated professional urban planner...to help the community and help the City move work-in-progress forward swiftly and with enough community input. This is the time to rethink community boards and the planning process," said the borough president.

To follow up on the panel discussions, C.B. 1 and M.A.S. will be reviewing the recommendations made by both the speakers and the audience members to create a white paper on land use reform. According to Menin, the charter revision commission has chosen not to review U.L.U.R.P. issues during this cycle, but has indicated that they may take it on during the next cycle. "We really want to be ahead of the curve [and] come in with a cogent set of recommendations for why we think U.L.U.R.P. needs to be reformed."

More information about the conference, including a transcript of the event and continued discussion, will be available on the M.A.S. website at www.mas.org/landuse.