

**Official Executive Summary on  
Columbia's Proposed Manhattanville in West Harlem Zoning and Academic  
Mixed-Use Development Environmental Impact Statement Draft Scope of Work**

**West Harlem Environmental Action  
(WE ACT) for Environmental Justice  
January 6, 2006**

In one of New York City's largest and most extensive proposal for a planned development in many years, Columbia University has requested that the City make a major change in zoning regulation of 35 acres of Manhattanville in West Harlem. Columbia plans to build a new 17-acre campus on this site (but its intentions regarding the remaining 18 acres is unclear). The proposed expansion presents a unique opportunity for Columbia to assume a leadership role in changing how development programs are planned and implemented in New York City. Indeed, this project can serve as a model for a revolutionary government-private interest-community collaboration in urban renewal and economic planning nationwide. With the new campus spreading out over eight city blocks along the waterfront and indefinite operation planned, Columbia will leave a permanent mark of unprecedented size and scope on the future of the West Harlem community. Therefore, it is vital that the Department of City Planning [hereinafter *DCP*], as the public agency legally charged with the protection of this community's environmental and public health, conduct a thorough and thoughtful investigation of the environmental impacts of Columbia's proposed development. In order to fulfill its legal mandate, DCP must require Columbia to prepare a complete, detailed, and specific description of its plans and the associated environmental impacts.

Columbia wants to build the new 17-acre campus because it claims to need the space in order to compete with its elitist Ivy League peer institutions, such as Yale, Princeton, and Harvard.<sup>1</sup> Columbia plans to satisfy its space needs by moving into an occupied neighborhood that is already vibrant with a unique synergy of ethnic, cultural and socioeconomic diversity – one of the few such communities in the City. Despite Columbia's efforts to paint Manhattanville as a virtual economic dead zone, the neighborhood has recently attracted some major businesses that promise to anchor a period of renewed economic growth. Additionally, although some of the area into which Columbia wishes to build has been plagued with slow economic growth as a result of years of government neglect and economic disinvestment, community efforts have developed and implemented programs designed to spur Manhattanville's revitalization, much of which is already underway.

West Harlem residents have recently won a hard-fought battle to build a park on the previously neglected waterfront. The park's construction has already begun and will be complete by 2007. Additionally, the New York City Economic Development Corporation [hereinafter *EDC*], in a collaborative effort between West Harlem residents, Community Board 9 [hereinafter *CB9*], potential developers, and economic and civic leaders, had completed the West Harlem Master Plan [hereinafter *Master Plan*] that represents the community's vision for the redevelopment of the West Harlem waterfront.<sup>2</sup> The Master Plan calls for a Manhattanville that is zoned for mixed uses integrating retail and service businesses with affordable residential housing developments and community spaces. Under the Master Plan, the community envisioned a revitalization zone that

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<sup>1</sup> Draft Scope of Work [hereinafter *draft scope* or *DSOW*] at 1.

<sup>2</sup> EDC, Master Plan (Aug. 2002), Excerpted at Attachment # 1.

## WEACT's Comment on Columbia Expansion's Draft Scope (Executive Summary)

would connect the Harlem waterfront with the 125<sup>th</sup> Street corridor. The revitalization zone was intended to promote the community's use of the new park for exercise and recreation as well as to attract additional, sustainable economic growth. Indeed, the Master Plan has already drawn the attention of developers and businesses that want to locate their operations in West Harlem.

Unknown to West Harlem community members, Columbia was acting on a parallel track, hatching a plan to develop their waterfront into an academic-biotech industrial complex.<sup>3</sup> Columbia made its intentions known to the public in the Winter of 2003. Despite an intense community effort to convince Columbia to include residents and local leaders in the planning process, Columbia has flatly refused. Instead, the University chose to conduct a series of "public meetings," hosted by CB9,<sup>4</sup> where it gave grand presentations, lecturing residents about the "benefits" that the new campus would bring to the West Harlem community. Although Columbia has claimed to be considerate of the community's concerns,<sup>5</sup> it has never allowed the community any input into its proposed development.

Columbia's only recently revealed plan lands the expansion campus squarely in the middle of the Manhattanville revitalization zone and will physically come between the community and the waterfront park residents had fought for so long and hard to build. In fact, with the heavy building and the University's notoriously heavy-handed security measures (including the heavy gates and guarded doors used at all its campus sites), the new development will likely altogether deprive West Harlem residents the use of the waterfront park.

Columbia cannot be allowed to continue along its path of secrecy and exclusion. The approach Columbia has followed forces the community to fit its development vision within Columbia's expansion ambitions; this is an arrogant, backward tactic of inexcusable injustice that the DCP must not allow, particularly because the community has already drafted a Master Plan for its development. Before allowing it to go forward with the environmental review process, the DCP must demand that Columbia work with Manhattanville residents and the City to fit its needs into those of the West Harlem community. At a minimum, the DCP must hold Columbia to task to fulfill its legal obligation in conducting an Environmental Impact analysis that thoroughly addresses and indeed mitigate, eliminate, or avoid the significant, adverse impact its expansion will have on the economy, environment and health of the Manhattanville community.

Pursuant to New York City's environmental impacts review provisions mandating government consideration of public comments, West Harlem Environmental Action, Inc. [hereinafter *WE ACT*] for Environmental Justice has reviewed Columbia's draft scope. We have the following comments.

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<sup>3</sup> *Research at the Proposed Manhattanville Campus*, Columbia U., CB9 Pub. Mtg. (Oct. 11, 2005), Attachment # 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Community Consultation and Public Review Fact Sheet*, Columbia U., CB9 Pub. Mtg. (Oct. 11, 2005), Attachment # 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*