

Former DCP staffers set to testify against de Blasio plan to blunt hotel development

By Joe Anuta

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Urban planning groups and former staffers from the city's Department of City Planning are set to testify against a proposal to curtail hotel development across the city — a policy also opposed by current department staffers but favored by the mayor and an influential hotel union.

Key details: The Regional Plan Association and Citizens Housing and Planning Council are set to testify Friday at a hearing on the administration's bid to require special permits for all new hotel projects. While hotels are allowed to be built as of right in most commercial districts across the city, the new rule will require every new project to traverse the public review process and obtain approval from the labor-friendly City Council — making it the only major type of development to undergo this level of scrutiny.

“There are places you can build a roller coaster as of right yet you can't build hotels as of right anywhere in the city? It makes no sense from a land-use perspective,” said Moses Gates, vice president for housing and neighborhood planning at the Plan Association.

Context: The Hotel Trades Council, a politically powerful labor organization, has long sought the additional layer of approval and succeeded in getting piecemeal implementation throughout the Bloomberg and de Blasio years. Around the time Mayor Bill de Blasio began mulling his ill-fated presidential campaign, which the union endorsed, the city [began working seriously](#) toward the trade council's ultimate goal: expanding the permitting process to every block in the five boroughs.

The city's initiative, which is also opposed from within the planning department, must go through the seven-month public review process, and Friday's scoping hearing will serve as a preliminary public comment session that is supposed to help shape the nature of the final proposal. Former staffers from the city's planning department plan to testify that the plan serves no logical purpose and will harm the city's recovery.

“Throughout my career at City Planning, I have been involved in zoning amendments affecting all areas of the city. These amendments have had a clear land use rationale and sought to address clearly defined issues or advance specific policy objectives,” Richard Barth, former executive director of the planning department, said in prepared testimony. “This proposal as currently described fails on all counts.”

Barth and several others expected to testify noted that if the plan goes forward, by the city's own calculations it would curtail development [at a time when the tourism industry is in free-fall](#) along with other major sectors of the economy.

“How can New York City continue to be one of the greatest tourist destinations in the world if we outlaw as of right hotels, even in the neighborhoods designed specifically for them?” Jessica Katz, executive director of the planning council, said in a statement.

The counter-argument: The trades council has argued that consumers need to be protected from subpar hotel offerings, and the mayor has said that hosteleries are uniquely disruptive to neighborhoods, though uses such as parking garages and even sports arenas are allowed as of right in some areas of the five boroughs.

David Karnovsky, a land-use attorney who formerly served as general counsel to the city's planning department, said that the administration's proposal does not demonstrate any ill effects stemming from existing inns.

“It fails to identify any problems caused by hotels in commercial districts. It does not present any data, studies or other evidence to support these broad assertions,” he said in prepared testimony. “The rationale is hollow.”

Regina Myer, who formerly ran the planning department's Brooklyn office and now heads up the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership, was set to testify that the plan would curtail economic development in the borough's economic nerve center at a time when the city needs it most.

"The proposed action conflicts with city and state economic policies, which call for supporting additional mixed-use growth at this location," she said in prepared remarks.