

City Council greenlights Gowanus, Blood Center rezonings

Votes are victories for real estate industry, de Blasio administration

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From left: Bill de Blasio, mayor of New York City; Brad Lander, New York City comptroller; and Ben Kallos, New York City council member (Getty Images, Wikipedia/INSIDER IMAGES, Friends of the Upper East Side)

The City Council both bucked and abided tradition Tuesday with the approval of a life sciences expansion on the Upper East Side and a sweeping rezoning in Brooklyn.

Lawmakers voted to rezone Gowanus to allow mixed-use buildings in an 82-block area largely restricted to manufacturing use. City officials estimate that the change will enable the construction of more than 8,500 apartments, 3,000 of which would be set aside for low- and moderate-income New Yorkers.

As part of the proposal, City Hall has agreed to pay an estimated \$200 million for repairs at two New York City Housing Authority complexes, Gowanus Houses and Wyckoff Gardens. Local Council members Brad Lander and Stephen Levin had said they would not support the rezoning unless the city committed to at least \$132 million.

The city is also pledging \$174 million in sewer upgrades and will require new development to meet new stormwater rules aimed at stemming sewage overflows into the infamously polluted Gowanus Canal, where a cleanup that was [fiercely debated](#) during the Bloomberg administration is underway.

The City Council also greenlit plans for a larger headquarters for the New York Blood Center at 310 East 67th Street. The proposal was approved despite objections from Council member Ben Kallos, who represents the area, and marked the first time since 2009 that the City Council has flouted member deference, or the tradition of voting with the local member on land use decisions.

The vote came after Council leaders [reached a deal](#) to reduce the height of the blood center building from 334 feet to 218 feet (233 with mechanical equipment). The project, which is being developed by Longfellow Real Estate Partners, would serve as an expanded headquarters for the New York Blood Center as well as office and lab space for other life science companies.

Kallos objected to the scale of the project and has called on the developer to reduce the height even further. The de Blasio administration, City Council leaders and Manhattan officials negotiated a deal without Kallos because they did not trust that he would reach an agreement that met their goals for the site.

On the Council floor ahead of the vote, Kallos said approval would send the message that “local council members don’t matter anymore” and would serve as a “blueprint for deep-pocketed developers to get whatever they want.”

He said he was committed to providing a new headquarters for the blood center, but said Longfellow would not budge on requests to reduce the ceiling of heights in commercial space in the building, nor in moving 30 feet of mechanical space in the middle of the project to the roof. It is unknown if he would have kept his commitment to providing a new headquarters if the developer did not yield to those two demands.

The Gowanus rezoning also faced opposition from community groups that argued it would add luxury housing and a scale of development that would overwhelm local infrastructure. Voice of Gowanus, a coalition of groups that had previously sued the city over the rezoning, has indicated that it plans to file another lawsuit related to environmental review of the proposal.

The rezoning’s approval is a victory for the de Blasio administration, which has made the creation of affordable housing a priority, with [mixed success](#). Gowanus will be the administration’s largest upzoning and is the first large-scale plan under the Mandatory Inclusionary Housing program to target an affluent neighborhood. The rezoning of Soho and Noho, which is imminent, will be the second.

“The additional affordable homes that this rezoning will help to create in this neighborhood will make the neighborhood and therefore the city fairer and more diverse while providing amazing opportunities for the lucky residents of those new affordable homes,” Vicki Been, deputy mayor of housing and economic development, said at a press conference Tuesday morning. “This rezoning delivers on this mayor’s commitment to equity.”