

Many critiquing Harlem redevelopment plan

Special to Sentinel-Voice

New York — Harlem's heart still beats strong on 125th Street, a lively thoroughfare where remnants of the neighborhood's legendary past sit side-by-side with newly arrived banks and chain stores.

But as new development sprouts among the soul food restaurants, funky record stores and such landmarks as the Apollo Theater, Harlem's main street — named one of the nation's 10 greatest last year — is struggling to retain the character residents have cherished for decades.

Members of the city's Planning Commission were loudly denounced for approving a controversial proposal recently to rezone Harlem's legendary 125th St.

The proposal would create condominiums, more performing arts space, hotels and a 21-story office tower with such high-profile tenants as Major League Baseball.

Officials say the changes will revive a cultural identity that had been threatened by unregulated development. But many longtime residents fear a rezoned 125th Street will price them out of their homes and erode even more of their community.

"It will be a disaster," said Sikhulu Shange, the owner of a 125th Street record store for more than three decades.

"People come to Harlem, they don't come to see a McDonald's. They don't come to see a Burger King," he said. "They want to come to places like The Record Shack, like Sylvia's (the famed soul food restaurant), where they can come down and feel the atmosphere of Harlem. All these things, they are in danger."

Many business leaders disagree with Shange's take on the zoning proposal, which has been in the works for four years and would cover dozens of blocks.

The largest arts groups in the corridor have supported it. Jonelle Procope, president and CEO of the Apollo Theater Foundation, said the rezoning "demonstrates a true understanding of Harlem, where culture is not simply important, but fundamentally woven into the fabric of community."

The plan offers developers incentives to create performing arts space by allowing them to build three square feet of space for every one square foot for the arts, said Planning Department spokeswoman Rachael Raynoff.

"We wanted to respect the heritage and respect the great heyday of the arts," Raynoff said. "People used to come here to be entertained. We're trying to have more Apollos." City Council Member



A sightseeing bus with tourist drives past the Apollo Theater and turns at the intersection known as African Square in the New York neighborhood of Harlem in this file photo.

Inez Dickens, who represents central Harlem, has also largely supported the plan, which would require the council's approval. Dickens has said fears that rezoning would create a high-rise district are unfounded. The plan, he noted, actually sets height limits for development that don't exist now.

"If you had the resources and you could get a shovel into the ground before this rezoning, no one could stop you from building something so out of context, so out of

character with the rest of the streetscape, you could pierce the very fabric of this village of Harlem," Dickens said at a public hearing.

City planners will propose one exception to the height restriction: Harlem Park, the first large office tower to be built in Harlem in decades. Major League Baseball is a likely tenant and the city has offered millions in other economic incentives.

Height is a main concern for Franc Perry, chairman of a Harlem community board.

The neighborhood is one of the last business districts in New York to allow pedestrians unobstructed sky views, he said. "It has a village character. You really do see people walking down the street saying hello to each other," Perry said.

He said no building should rise higher "than the cap of the Hotel Theresa," the landmark where Louis Armstrong, Lena Horne and Fidel Castro stayed and where Malcolm X held meetings of the Organization of Afro-American Unity after breaking from the Nation of Islam.

Perry and others also worry that allowing about 2,500 new apartments on the corridor would displace residents and threaten the street's commercial feel. Raynoff said new residents would bring a customer base for the businesses.

Shange said denser development would dwarf his small storefront, where he has fought eviction for over a year. He said when he arrived in Harlem, his store selling Caribbean, African and gospel was one of 15 music stores.

"I'm the only one left now," he said.

About 70 other small businesses with a history on the street feel similarly threatened, he said.

"The little bit we have, we

are being dislocated. It doesn't seem that there is anything we can do if they are successful," Shange said. "The only thing which will help us is that this whole plan fails."

The City Council must vote on the proposal no later than April 30.

Tennis

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The 17-year-old from Dover, Delaware beat Muhammad in January. Not that day. Muhammad prevailed, 6-3, 7-5. To make the finals of the Hilton Cup against France's Camille Pin, who beat China's Meng Yuan.

In the first set of the final, Muhammad held her own against her formidable 27-year-old opponent. Each point was hotly contested. With the games tied 4-4, Muhammad's misplay of an air volley in game nine seemed to be the turning point: her in her ground strokes wavered. Pin won that game and the next six to take a 5-0 lead in the final set before Muhammad broke Pin's serve. Pin broke serve back and to end the game, set and match at 6-4, 6-1.

Both Blenkiron and Asia's father, Ron Muhammad, said two mistakes — in game nine and game 10 in the first set — prevented Muhammad from becoming the first Black to win the Hilton Cup.

"Asia played well," said Pin, in her halting English. "I think the others had better get ready because she has some great matches ahead of her." Muhammad, as an amateur, received a glass vase while the winner, Pin, also received a vase and a check for \$7,315.

Muhammad began playing tennis at age 8 and started winning tournaments at 12. Though she's still in high school, she isn't sure about turning professional or continuing with her education.

Her expenses are paid for by the Andre Agassi Charitable Foundation Tennis program, led by tennis icons Agassi and his wife, Steffi Graf, among others.

"Andre called nightly, to ask how I was doing," said Muhammad.

If she chooses a college education as her first priority, she'd probably go to the University of Southern California, her father's alma mater where he played basketball. Or she could turn pro like track star, Allyson Felix, who ran as a professional after high school and still graduated from UCLA.

Mentors take youth to hit the slopes

Special to Sentinel-Voice

The Sierra Snow Gliders of Las Vegas recently partnered with the Las Vegas Housing Authority to take 41 youth to the Brian Head Navaho Lodge. Viewing snow-capped mountains from afar is about as close as many of the Housing Authority youth have come to snow.

Fifteen youth living in government subsidized housing joined the Sierra Shining Star Youth division for an outing of skiing, snowboarding lessons and enjoying nature. The collaboration is part of the Sierra Snow Gliders efforts to expose novice skiers to the sport. As members of the National Brotherhood

of Skiers, the group provides friendship and camaraderie for skiers new to Las Vegas.

Made up of more than 84 groups in 75 cities in 33 states — and with a combined membership of 20,000 adults and children divided into four regions — NBS seeks to promote skiing within the African-American

community and to identify, select and finance the training of potential Blacks with the skills to make the Olympic Games.

Carolyn Haywood supervises the Sierra Snow Gliders Shining Stars youth group, while Gliders president Breanna Penniston-John helms the program, which

recently honors as NBS' "best youth program" of the western region. The youth also swept the Western Regional Winter Carnival in February at Lake Tahoe, with six of nine youth winning first-place medals.

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