

Zoning a Better Midtown

After careful study, New York City's Planning Commission has proposed a constructive set of new controls for midtown development. By offering zoning advantages with tax incentives and faster building opportunities, the planners hope to shift growth from the overdeveloped East Side to the neglected West Side, reducing the cost of building in a specified area by 25 percent.

The plan should work if the real estate market stays strong. Even if construction slows, it is needed soon to shape the next boom. The plan has been reviewed and amended for a year. In a month or two it will move through the legal process toward final public hearings and the Board of Estimate.

Due regard has been shown for the services and amenities needed to maintain midtown as a functional and appealing place to work and live. The regulations promise improved subway entrances, stations and connections, better pedestrian movement, control over building bulk and density and provision for light, air and open space.

Some building features for which extra space bonuses are now given — mostly to reduce street congestion — would be mandated. Other bonuses would be reduced. The greatest restraint would come in the

East Side midblocks, to preserve the smaller, older buildings so essential to variety. And to make design easier, the planners propose a new system of calculating light and sky exposure, giving architects flexibility without the need for permits or reviews.

Probably the most important change would make building in New York a more predictable, as-of-right process, reducing the time and cost of trading design features and construction rights one building at a time. This would routinely allow construction on more sites and stabilize land values and the expectations of developers.

The complex proposal is not trouble-free. The Clinton Special District impinges on the growth area, requiring arduous new negotiation with the community. The Convention Center area cannot be rezoned until appropriate uses have been determined. The density and daylight calculations will need to be guarded against manipulation for the production of more monotonous and crushing blockbusters. And the recommendations for mini-parks are a dangerous invitation to demolition in sidestreets.

All in all, however, the plan is a badly needed statement of public policy. It should be moved along quickly and sympathetically.