

MARCH 24, 2003

## TOURO COLLEGE WANTS NEW BUILDING

A uniquely New York problem—the near-impossibility of colleges and universities to exist within a confined campus—couldn't be solved at the March 4 meeting of Community Board 7 because of yet another local trademark: unyieldingly strict zoning laws. An attempt by Touro College—a private, nonprofit institution with 25 campuses in the New York metro area—to consolidate its scattered facilities on the Upper West Side was foiled when Board 7 rejected the package of variances sought by the college for a new building at 223-227 West 60th Street. While members of the board expressed sympathy for Touro's plight, they concluded that the board wouldn't be able, in good conscience, to approve a building that would be 55 percent larger than zoning laws permit.

Many of the 250 students who attend the all-women's college live in a dormitory at West 85th Street and Amsterdam Avenue—an impractical arrangement, since their classrooms are in a building at East 30th Street and Lexington Avenue. Furthermore, Akiya Kobre, vice president of administration and operations for Touro, called the current building “inappropriate for college use,” describing it as an inadequate and run-down facility.

According to Mr. Kobre, a relocation to West 60th Street is “terribly important for the survival and growth of the college.” The proposed 19-story, 136,000-square-foot glass-and-steel building would contain both classroom space for up to 350 students and market-rate apartments for the general public, thus providing the college with revenue. The dormitory would remain on 85th Street.

These plans represent a significant redesign of a previously proposed brick building that board member Richard Asche called “aesthetically challenged” and board member Ethel Sheffer more bluntly described as “shockingly terrible.” At the board's December meeting the land-use committee complained that the original proposed building was not only unattractive, but far exceeded the 86,000-square-foot cap.

After the December meeting, Gruzen Samton (the architectural firm behind Columbia University's student center, as well as the co-designer of the new 72nd Street subway station) took its rejected scheme back to the drawing board. The aesthetic complaints were addressed but, according to Howard Weiss, counsel for the college, it was impossible to reduce the bulk of the building in accordance with Board 7's wishes because, he said, it would cripple the financial viability of the project. “The project has to sink or swim as you see it,” Mr. Weiss said, meaning that the building will probably never go up if the college doesn't receive the variances it originally requested.

In order to receive a variance from the Board of Standards and Appeals (B.S.A.), which has the final authority to reject or approve the project, Touro must prove that the proposed site has unique “hardships” that make it financially unfeasible to construct a building within the zoning caps. The college claims there are four particular physical conditions that will significantly increase the cost of the project and therefore make it necessary to erect a larger building. These include a layer of granite bedrock approximately one and a half feet below the surface of the lot, as well as the distinct slope of the street, contamination in the soil, and the fact that the button factory which currently occupies the site is inappropriate for residential use and must be torn down. However, Board 7 countered that these conditions are common in the area and so do not warrant special treatment. Nor was the board convinced that Touro suffers from a financial hardship acute enough to warrant the construction of 101 apartment units when the zoning allows for only 71.

Responding to Mr. Weiss' claim that a 19-story building wouldn't be out of character on a block that includes a 33-story apartment tower across the street and another 35-story apartment complex on the corner of Amsterdam Avenue, Ms. Sheffer called the latter building “an accident of history that many people regret and do not wish to repeat.”

The board's recommendation is currently pending before the B.S.A.

—Benjamin Ryan