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Parents upset over school rezoning

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BY WINNIE McCROY | Concerned parents, community board members and representatives of elected officials came together at PS 11 on October 11 for the first in several Community Education Council (CEC) forums about the New York City Department of Education (DOE) Rezoning Draft Plan. The plan, set to go in effect in the Fall of 2012, will redraw Manhattan's school zones south by several blocks, relocating some students to schools outside of their area.

"We have heard wonderful things about PS 11. It's a great school," said Vanessa Merlis — a family therapist and mother of two who noted that she and her husband moved to Chelsea specifically so their children could attend PS 11. "We want the best for them. My son, who is athletic, wants to participate in PS 11's swim club, and most of the kids from his preschool go there. We thought he would go to school with the kids in his building and neighborhood. It's just another example of the middle class being shafted to accommodate wealthy constituents."

With the exception of local school principals, the majority of people assembled at the meeting opposed the redistricting. Among the reasons they identified were that they wanted their kids to go to school near their home, that they did not want siblings to go to different schools and that New York City simply needed more schools.

In Chelsea, parents pointed out that both the Foundlings Elementary School (on 17th Street) and the new Hudson Yards Elementary/Intermediate School would be open within the next two years, necessitating further rezoning.

The CEC agreed that the area did need additional schools — noting that the DOE had proposed the redistricting plan to deal with school and classroom overcrowding, severe school-level budget cuts, unsustainable bottom-heavy kindergarten enrollment, decreased specialty classes and the desire to avoid enrollment lotteries.

The District 2 CEC — which has the authority to approve or deny DOE zoning proposals — is a 12-member council comprised of nine parents with children in the school system, two members appointed by the Manhattan Borough President and a district high school senior appointed by the community superintendent. The October 11 CEC meeting consisted of DOE Community Superintendent Mariano Guzman, CEC Co-Chair Shino Tanikawa, Tamara Rowe, Michael Markowitz, Eric Goldberg, Sarah Chu, and Demetri Ganiaris. Also present at the meeting were representatives from elected officials including City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer, Representative Dick Gottfried, and Assembly member Jerrold Nadler.

The CEC will hold three community forums, then provide the DOE with feedback in early

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December. The DOE will then revise the proposals and return them to the CEC, who will present them to the community.

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“Having separate zones does not solve the issue of overcrowding,” said Principal Kelly Shannon of PS 41. “It is imperative that we get a handle on where the numbers are. It is also good for the family across the street from PS 3 or 41 to know that’s their school. All of the and when families know what their zoned school is from the get-go, it eliminates the confusion.”

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the data: Air of our schools have grown large, and we parents need complete transparency and access to accurate data....Without it, we will be back here in two years. If our children turned in work like this, they would get an ‘incomplete.’

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Bruce Kreigel, a Chelsea parent who said he moved into the area so his children could attend PS 11, said that the proposed zone would “force Chelsea families out of the planned-on zone to make room for Tribeca families who don’t want to be there. They don’t want their kids crossing Canal Street at the Holland Tunnel.”

Several Tribeca parents agreed with this assessment, saying that they wanted their children to attend their neighborhood school.

Both Hoylman and CB2 Vice-Chair Keen Berger spoke in opposition to the redistricting plans. Berger said that she believed the panic about overcrowding was leading to poor decisions. Hoylman added, “The unique character of PS 3 is at stake if the Village is rezoned like this. We don’t want to send kids who live below 14th Street to Chelsea schools. We need to preserve choice...and we need more data from the DOE.”

Community Board 5 (CB5) Education, Housing and Human Services committee chair Layla Law-Gisiko was eager to make some changes, noting, “There is not one elementary school in our district. The CB5 resolution wants a new school to be a zoned school.” CB5 will meet at 6pm on October 25 to discuss the issue (for more information, email office@cb5.org).

Corey Johnson, Chair of Community Board 4 (CB4), noted that the zoning would change the northern boundary lines for children in Penn South, moving some children formerly zoned for PS 11 to PS 33. “They are both great schools. But the issue is, is it entirely necessary at this time?” Johnson asked. “In South Chelsea, the choice between PS 41 and 3 is not a simple change. People feel very invested in these schools...and in West Chelsea, we have seen a tremendous amount of new construction.”

Johnson told Chelsea Now that there had been a large outpouring of concern to CB4 from Penn South parents about the proposed redistricting. He also expressed concerns about the two new schools currently being built in the area — the 563-seat Foundling Elementary School and the Hudson Yards Schools (to be completed in 2017, with a projected 420 Elementary seats and 330 Intermediate seats).

“I have heard that if there’s going to be a new school coming along in a little more than two years that’s going to be able to accommodate elementary students in Chelsea and the Village, another rezoning will have to be done,” said Johnson. “The question is, why do this now when it may need to be done two years from now?”

Johnson said that he hoped that the Foundling School and Hudson Yards were taken into consideration by the School Authority and the DOE as they project capacity numbers — noting that this would be among the many issues that CB4 would look at during an October 18 Quality

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of Life, Arts, Culture and Education Safety Meeting.

“The neighborhoods on the west side are very attractive, safe, highly-desirable neighborhoods, and we’ve seen a tremendous influx of parents and people with children,” said Johnson. “It is a very diverse neighborhood, and in CB4, we really value that. I hope that we continue to have a diverse neighborhood. We want it to be not just luxury housing; it is important to maintain a middle class that is able to send their kids to good public schools and get a high-quality education.”

Johnson said he felt the CEC members had been thorough, receptive and transparent in coming to communities affected by this to listen to concerns. “They have a Herculean decision on their hands, and I am appreciative of their effort so far,” he said.

The CEC’s Markowitz noted that at the end of the day, “The question was not whether we have X kids for X seats, but the fairest way to spread them around. The alternative is a lottery. We are taking a chance with a lottery if we don’t change the lines to match the population increase. Then, you might be zoned for a school but have no guarantee that you get in. A child with a sibling in the school gets first choice over your four-year-old.”

“If we don’t do the painful thing in the near future...your kid might be in a situation of overcrowding, with no specialty classes,” said Tanikawa. “Sure, your children might get into PS 3 or 11 next year, but by the time they are in fifth grade, they will be in a class with 32 other kids.”

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