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Despite Much Rezoning, Scant Change in Residential Capacity

By **KAREEM FAHIM**

Five years ago, community groups in South Park Slope, Brooklyn, demanded protection from the new apartment buildings that seemed to be sprouting everywhere, pushing above the neighborhood's low-rise canopy.

Among other things, the city's rezoning plan for the neighborhood chopped several stories off a proposed 11-story apartment building across the street from Augie Tjahaya's 2-story home. "It was going to be a monster," said Mr. Tjahaya, a photographer, praising the city's intervention.

In an era of unprecedented rezoning across [New York City](#), a new report found that the vast majority of the changes preserved neighborhoods the way they were, protecting them from denser or out-of-scale development. The report, prepared by [N.Y.U.'s Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy](#) and scheduled to be released Monday, covers the Bloomberg administration's aggressive rezoning efforts from 2003 to 2007, a period in which 18 percent of the city's lots were rezoned.

The report considered 76 rezoning measures and is said to be the first statistical analysis of the city's current strategy. It said that on 86 percent of the lots that were rezoned, building capacity was reduced or limited, or limits were placed on the kind of structure that could be built.

On the remaining 14 percent of rezoned lots, rules were eased to allow for greater density. Despite the thrust of the rezoning of most of the lots, the cumulative effect of the changes was to add 1.7 percent to residential capacity.

Vicki Been, the principal author of the report, said some of the findings had come as a surprise, especially given that officials made much of the fact that they were preparing the city to [absorb one million new residents by 2030](#).

"There are an awful lot of downzonings and contextual-only zonings that may limit the city's

ability to do that,” said Professor Been, who is faculty director of the Furman center.

The report suggests that the rezoning actions have created the capacity for as many as 80,000 new housing units, or as many as 200,000 more people, but city officials said they were on track to meet the population projections and were not relying on rezoning alone to provide new places for people to live.

Amanda M. Burden, the city’s planning director since 2002, said the city’s approach to zoning was based on a “finely grained” process of listening to the needs of separate communities and neighborhoods. “We respond to communities where the threat is the greatest to the neighborhood fabric,” she said. “We upzone where it’s sustainable, and where reinvestment is needed.”

Mitchell L. Moss, a professor of urban policy and planning at New York University who has been an informal adviser to Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#), said that for decades, the city had been zoned for too many people, and that it was overdue for the kind of adjustment pursued by the Bloomberg administration. Ms. Burden “has done more to reshape the city than anything [Robert Moses](#) ever did,” he said.

Whether or not that is true, the Furman Center report starts to paint a picture of significant change, finding that city planners were, in many cases, successful in their goal of creating housing within half a mile of existing transportation hubs. In other places, though, zoning regulations that restricted new building have taken “capacity away from communities well served by transit,” the report says.

Most of the new residential capacity was created in Queens, followed by Manhattan and then Brooklyn. In the Bronx, rezoning measures that affected more than 18 percent of the borough added virtually no residential capacity, the report found.

The report also looked at the intersections of planning decisions with race and income, though it drew no conclusion about motives. Rezoning mostly concerned with neighborhood preservation was more likely to occur in census tracts with higher white populations and higher incomes, the report found, while lots where restrictions were loosened to allow for more density tended to be in census tracts with more black or Hispanic residents than the city median.

Asked about this, Ms. Burden said the city’s zoning policies were “color blind.” Other planning experts noted that the racial and class dynamics could be interpreted in different ways.

They could reflect efforts by minority residents in neglected areas to reach out to the city’s planners, searching for ways to bring more people to their streets. In the rezoning proposals for

Harlem and Jamaica, Queens — which both involved plans for significant new housing and office space — many local groups called for the rezoning changes, prevailing over local opposition.

But some see the rezoning as tending to lock in the homogeneity of certain neighborhoods. Ronald Shiffman, a former planning commissioner, said: “Whether intentional or through a lack of sensitivity to the concept of equitable development, downzoning in predominantly higher-income and white communities leads to restricted housing options for people of color and low- and moderate-income residents.”

Brad Lander, a city councilman from Brooklyn, said the city needed to ensure that “communities are receiving their fair share of growth, across boundaries of race and class and borough.”

Mr. Lander, a former head of the [Pratt Center for Community Development](#), said the report showed that the city’s approach was often reasonable. Even the protective rezoning of side streets in neighborhoods like Park Slope incorporated “smart growth” principles by encouraging development on wider avenues.

But Mr. Lander said the city planners had shied away from a more honest conversation with the city as a whole, one that would start to distribute the burden of development more widely.

“If we don’t do that,” he said, “communities with more political power will be able to achieve their goals more effectively.”