

Garment District Alliance

INNOVATION

The Garment District's plan to support fashion production and commercial office expansion was intended to realize the economic potential of a core area of the Manhattan central business district while strengthening the fashion industry that has long been a fixture in the neighborhood. The main constituencies that benefit are:

- The fashion industry in the Garment District and the city, by providing grants, tax abatements, and programming that are targeted toward supporting fashion manufacturers in the Garment District. Other elements of the plan address district place-making to celebrate the industry's local heritage.
- Property owners and non-fashion businesses in the Garment District. Removing the Special Garment Center District Zoning Overlay allows property owners to make better use of their buildings as driven by market demand. The neighborhood has added tens of thousands of non-fashion related jobs in recent years. Some properties and businesses were not in compliance with the old preservation zoning and will now be able to be legitimized.
- Residents, workers and visitors in the Garment District. The preservation zoning artificially restrained a neighborhood that is at the heart of the busiest part of the most vibrant city in the country. In recent years the Garment District has transformed from a neighborhood that was essentially closed on nights and weekends to a diverse area with around-the-clock activity and expanded retail, dining, and entertainment. Removing the preservation zoning will further accelerate this improvement as the neighborhood will be opened to a wider variety of businesses.

OUTCOME

The recent zoning changes have created a road map for economic growth and there are already early indications of the long-term transformation to come. Since the zoning changes were enacted, several new, significant tenants have signed leases in the district. Additionally, the Alliance has been working to identify participants for the New York City Industrial Development Agency (NYCIDA) program, which provides property owners with tax abatements in exchange for providing long-term and affordable leases to fashion manufacturers. To date the Alliance has met with more than 25 relevant property owners and some are actively pursuing enrollment in the program. Additionally, the Alliance hosted a town hall for property owners to explain the implications of the zoning changes, the new programming, and how to cure violations in buildings that were out of compliance with the old zoning. The Alliance created a special programming committee to identify programming and providers to sustain the garment industry's presence in the district and celebrate its past. Members of the committee are industry stakeholders and parties of interest dedicated to finding meaningful ways to improve the industry, with an emphasis on manufacturing. The committee has held its first meeting to discuss goals and process, and the Alliance is already moving forward with initiatives to renovate and re-imagine public realm elements that celebrate the fashion industry's heritage in the neighborhood. One example of this is a new 25-foot tall button and needle sculpture on 7th Avenue, currently in the design and public review stages.

EXECUTION

The Garment District Alliance has actively advocated for changes to the neighborhood's zoning code for many years, but the formal project was a nearly two-year effort once the Mayor, City Council and Borough President's offices came on board, along with local and industry stakeholders. The Alliance drove community support for the project, working extensively with property owners, businesses and local stakeholders to gather input, educate and dispel myths about the potential implications of the changes. The Alliance pushed for the parameters of the zoning and programming while compiling data to support the need for change. The economic data compiled by the Alliance painted a clear picture of how the preservation zoning failed to maintain garment manufacturing, while demand for more diverse uses in the neighborhood had risen.

Zoning changes in New York City can be long and controversial processes. While the Garment District rezoning was not without debate, once all stakeholders came to the table, an agreement with wide support was completed within a two-year time frame. The combination of the zoning change and programmatic elements resulted in a plan that was supported by the Mayor, local Councilmember, Borough President, economic development agency and Council of Fashion Designers of America.

REPRESENTATION

Balancing the interests of a wide range of stakeholders was the most challenging part of this project. To get buy-in and successfully implement the zoning changes and programming, it was necessary to gain consensus from parties with very different views on how the neighborhood should evolve. In general, property owners felt that the preservation zoning was artificially inhibiting their ability to make the best use of their property, preventing the Garment District from being a more vibrant and diverse mixed-use neighborhood in the heart of Manhattan. On the other hand, the remaining businesses comprising the shrinking garment manufacturing industry feared that removing the preservation requirement would accelerate the demise of the industry in the neighborhood and city. The Mayor, Borough President and City Council were all involved in crafting the final details of the rezoning, and the public was given the chance to have their say at community meetings and public hearings. Ultimately, the proposal received buy-in from most of the major stakeholders because it balanced lifting restrictions on property owners with significant programming elements for supporting fashion manufacturing in the neighborhood and city moving forward.

REPLICATION

In many cities in the United States, the greatest impediment to vibrant and diverse downtowns and neighborhoods is outdated zoning and other local regulations. In the Garment District, the 1987 preservation requirement failed to achieve its goal of saving fashion manufacturing while placing artificial constraints that surrounding neighborhoods did not have to contend with, leaving the district comparatively underdeveloped. Similar situations exist in many American cities, and city leaders, downtown associations and business improvement districts should focus on modernizing their regulations. For example, ideas such as separation of uses and minimum parking requirements, once standard in every American city, are now recognized to be repressive to vibrant downtowns, yet many cities have never amended these rules. As with the Garment District rezoning, when making changes to local codes, it is important to package other elements that ease the concerns of stakeholders who oppose the changes.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

At its heart, this project was focused around one very simple premise: removing the preservation zoning requirement. This simple text modification, however, would not only affect the industry, but the entire neighborhood. As such, various programmatic elements which needed to be introduced to support the fashion industry introduced a layer of complexity to the plan. The Alliance's role was most critical to cutting through the complexity by focusing on effective community messaging to various, and often conflicting, constituent factions. The Alliance conducted an extensive public information campaign and organized countless meetings with property owners, fashion industry stakeholders, elected officials, and other community members to make the case for the plan. The Alliance also continues to work to identify businesses and property owners for the [NYCIDA Garment Center Program](#) that allows tax abatements for long-term fashion tenant leases. Since this type of program is new to many property and business owners, the Alliance's promotion and education of the program is key to its success.