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City Planners Approve Cooper Union High-Rises, Citing College's Public Benefits

By LYDIA POLGREEN

Despite strong objections from some East Village residents, the City Planning Commission approved a plan by Cooper Union yesterday to build two tall buildings that school officials hope will lift its fortunes after a decade of deficits.

Under the plan, Cooper Union will raze its six-story engineering school at 51 Astor Place and the two-story Hewitt Building, which takes up the east side of Third Avenue from Sixth to Seventh Streets. The Hewitt Building will be replaced with a nine-story academic building, and the engineering school will be replaced with a 212-foot office tower, with about 14 stories.

George Campbell Jr., president of Cooper Union, said the college made many concessions to the neighborhood. The plan approved yesterday by the Planning Commission was a compromise, he said.

"We made some significant modifications and reduced the bulk of the buildings," Dr. Campbell said. The college also backed off a plan to build on an unused piece of Stuyvesant Street, and agreed to a set of design constraints to fit the neighborhood, he said.

The initial request involved a complex series of zoning changes. The goal was to maximize the amount of usable office space in the new tower. The commissioners allowed an increase close to what Cooper Union requested. They also agreed to allow commercial development on land restricted by law to educational and philanthropic uses.

Some residents were not placated by the changes, complaining that bulky office buildings had no place in a neighborhood of low-rise residential buildings.

"We are very disappointed," said Anna L. Sawaryn, chairwoman of the Coalition to Save the East Village. "This is going to fundamentally change our community, and we are opposed to it."

But the commissioners said the public good that Cooper Union does by offering free education for its students — most of them New Yorkers — outweighed the impact on the community.

"The very legitimate concerns have to be weighed against the continuing mission of Cooper Union, which is very important to our city," Commissioner Kenneth J. Knuckles said.

Three commissioners voted against the plan — Joseph B. Rose, William J. Grinker and Karen A. Phillips. "I don't find a legitimate rationale for this project," Mr. Rose said.

The project is the latest effort to provide much-needed cash to Cooper Union, a storied institution on

Astor Place since 1859. It provides a free college education to about 900 students in art, architecture and engineering.

The school has been operating with a \$9 million deficit for more than a decade and has seen its investment portfolio shrink. The school has considerable real estate holdings, including the land beneath the Chrysler Building, and rent from these properties makes up about half of its operating budget. A plan to build a luxury hotel on an 18,000-square-foot parking lot the school owns in the neighborhood fell apart after Sept. 11.

"This project is absolutely critical for our financial well being," Dr. Campbell said of the project the commission approved yesterday.

Not everyone in the neighborhood opposes the project.

Lyn Pentecost, a Cooper Union graduate who has lived in the East Village for 30 years, said the criticism of the school was unfair. "This is a neighborhood that is really uncomfortable with change," she said. "This is an institution that is committed to urban development. I am totally shocked people are opposing it."

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