



Statement upon City Planning’s certification of a zoning change to eliminate the Special Garment Center District

On June 11, 2018

New York City’s Garment Center is the greatest concentration of fashion design and production on the planet. The lasting vitality of this industry was made possible 30 years ago by creation of a Special Garment Center District, which mandated a diversity of spaces to sustain the diverse users that make up the fashion ecosystem: the designers, pattern makers, cutters, sewers and pleaters; the sellers of textiles, buttons and supplies; the showrooms, factors and truckers; the schools whose graduates both launch their own lines and infuse new talent to continuously rejuvenate the industry; and even the restaurants and delis where manufacturers meet to swap information and favors.

The implementation of the Special District was driven by the incredible dedication, foresight and enlightened self-interest of industry stakeholders led by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, the New York Skirt and Sportswear Association, and many of the owners of the showroom buildings. They foresaw that the proposed redevelopment of Times Square immediately to the north of the Garment Center would attract office development that would eventually displace the manufacturers and that displacement would undermine the productivity of designers and the very desirable showrooms, which paid more than other office users. This cascading effect would have led to the collapse of the entire ecosystem.

Thirty years later, despite an almost complete lack of enforcement, the ecosystem continues to innovate and create fashion that generates \$11 billion in wages and 184,000 jobs.¹ As garment production has dropped in the United States and technology has made existing workers more productive, the need for production space in proximity to designers, while still important, has decreased. There is a need to maintain some space for production but not as much as provided by the zoning. At the same time, the City cites a need for additional low-cost office space to house new, emerging sectors.

Pratt Center for Community Development has long advocated that the Special District zoning could be replaced with alternative strategies to preserve the diversity of spaces needed to sustain the ecosystem and that the best way to achieve this would be through the ownership of space by a nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening the industry. The industry must control its own space to ensure its future.

¹ <https://www.nycfdc.com/press-release/mayor-de-blasio-announces-15-million-initiative-support-citys-fashion-industry>



Today's expected certification of zoning changes to eliminate the Special District and replace it with tax incentives for building owners to rent to manufacturers and, more importantly, a commitment by the City to fund the acquisition of space by a mission-driven nonprofit is perhaps the most significant milestone since the creation of the district itself. These actions represent smart, prescient moves in a long-term strategy to ensure that the fashion industry remains vibrant for decades to come.

There have been many missteps along the way and many, many details remain to be hammered out for the vision to be fulfilled. But in this moment, there is unique alignment among the industry, elected officials, and the residents of the surrounding community that makes me hopeful. Council Speaker Corey Johnson, Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer, EDC President James Patchett and their staffs have spent a tremendous amount of time and energy to build a new foundation for the industry's continued vitality.

At the Board of Estimate hearing before the vote on the proposed Special Garment Center District in 1987, a woman from Community Board 4 in Manhattan testified that it was her job sewing that kept bread on her family's table during the Depression. The fashion industry is one of the great forces that shaped the city's history and continues to be part of the constellation of industries that drive New York's future as a global center for creativity and innovation. Thousands of talented aspiring designers move to New York City each year to be part of this future.

We at the Pratt Center are committed to working with all the industry stakeholders – the manufacturers, the workers, the designers present and future and the residents of the surrounding communities – and elected officials to ensuring the fashion industry remains an exciting, vibrant and inspiring part of the city for generations to come.

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