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Hotel Development  
in New York City

# STILL ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT



PRATT  
CENTER  
FOR  
COMMUNITY  
DEVELOPMENT

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The tourism industry is of tremendous importance to New York City's overall economy and it would not be the dynamic city that it is without a vibrant tourism sector. In 2018, tourism directly generated more than 300,000 jobs and \$4.6 billion in tax revenues to the city.<sup>1</sup>

Almost as important, tourism adds to the city's cultural vitality, which is an asset that helps lure other sectors. Almost two-thirds of employment in the arts and entertainment sectors are attributable to tourist spending.<sup>2</sup> For example, in the 2018-2019 season, there were 14.8 million admissions to Broadway Theatres, an all-time high, and 65% of those attendees were tourists.<sup>3</sup>

The hotel segment of the tourism sector is particularly important. First, high wages are a distinct characteristic of the hotel segment. The average annual wage in hotel/lodging/accommodation jobs is more than \$67,000.<sup>4</sup> This can be compared to wages in the retail or restaurant sectors, which have similar characteristics in terms of the demographics and educational attainment of the workforce, but with much lower wages.

Second, hotels are a critical piece of the tourism infrastructure that is necessary for all the other segments to flourish. While the city's restaurants, retailing, entertainment, sporting, and cultural resources all draw people to New York City, without hotels there can be virtually no tourism. These are "external" benefits generated by the hotel industry but not captured by hotels in the form of revenue.

In fact, the hotel segment itself faces challenges, demonstrated by the declining *Revenue Per Available Room* (*RevPAR*), a calculation that provides some insight into the overall wellbeing of the industry. While the Draft Environmental Impact Statement released by the Department of City Planning for the Citywide Hotel Text Amendment in May 2021 projects growth in demand for hotel rooms at approximately its historic rate, the growth rate in demand for hotel rooms is far from certain. The future of business travel is particularly uncertain given the surge in working remote during the pandemic, which accustomed workers to virtual meetings and operations, and is leading to changes in corporate travel policies that will most likely reduce business travel.

Hotels also present a land use challenge for their neighbors if development is unplanned, and potential land use conflicts are allowed to undermine a neighborhood's quality of life. Conflicts over noise, traffic, sanitation and neighborhood character are not uncommon, particularly as hotels begin to cluster and the density of conflicting uses increases.

In addition, the boom/bust nature of unplanned development

Figure 1  
**Sector Wage Comparison: Accommodations,  
Retail Trade and Restaurants (2019)**

Sector	Annual Average Employment	Average Annual Wages (in thousands)	Annual Wages per Employee
Accommodation	52,730	\$3,638,738	\$69,007
Retail trade	344,523	\$16,042,673	\$46,565
Restaurants and other eating places	275,616	\$9,135,219	\$33,145

Data: Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, Bureau of Labor Statistics.  
Accommodation (NAICS 721, 44-45 and 7225), 2019 Annual Averages for Private establishments, accessed July 8, 2021.

is leading to additional conflicts as vacant or underutilized hotels cluster in some areas and are now being used for homeless shelters without adequate services for those experiencing homelessness. If vacant hotels are to be used as housing for the homeless, there needs to be greater planning, commitment of public resources, and other public interventions to assure that the residents are properly served. The use of hotels for sheltering the homeless is a symptom of the distinct and urgent need for more affordable housing, a persistent challenge for the City that requires greater financial resources and political attention.

Given on the one hand the land use challenges presented by hotels but on the other hand the important economic development benefits derived from their relatively well-paying jobs and the critical role they play in tourism overall, the City needs to develop the right process for balancing, mitigating and remediating costs and benefits. To this end, the City should move forward with implementation of a special permit process on a citywide basis. This will create an opportunity for the stakeholders to raise their concerns and work towards strategies to maximize the public benefits, reduce the potential for conflict, and create a mechanism for fostering local employment.

The City should also work with the industry to determine how to best address the overall economic wellbeing of the hotel segment in a more comprehensive process that is not governed by land use implications.



Founded in 1963, the Pratt Center for Community Development works for a more just, equitable, and sustainable city for all New Yorkers. As part of Pratt Institute, we leverage professional skills including participatory planning, community organizing, and public policy advocacy to support community-based organizations in their efforts to challenge systemic inequities and advance sustainable development.

# II. BACKGROUND

In 2015, Pratt Center published *Hotel Development In New York City: Room For Improvement*, which examined the impact hotel development was having on land use in several communities in New York City. Our analysis found that hotel development could “price-out” other users and thereby undermine other public policy objectives such as the development of affordable housing. More often than not hotels generated conflicts around noise, traffic, parking, and other quality of life issues, or contributed to undermining the character of some neighborhoods.

These findings were the basis for Pratt Center’s recommendation that the City create a special permit for the development of hotels. While much has changed since 2015, certain fundamentals have not:

**“New York City needs a diverse economy that includes a healthy tourism sector; however, the growth of land uses associated with this sector should be balanced with other land use needs. The creation of a special permit process for hotels would provide the opportunity for communities and elected officials to balance competing land uses, to channel hotel development to where it is most appropriate, and to negotiate for better quality hotel jobs that can potentially go to local residents.”<sup>5</sup>**



Developed in a former barrel factory, the Wythe Hotel opened in 2012, and was featured on the cover of *Room for Improvement* in 2015. One year later, a 21-story, 183-room luxury hotel, the William Vale, opened across the street. The building includes 40,000 square feet of retail and office space on the lower levels. Photo: Shinya Suzuki / Flickr



*Room for Improvement* looked at a variety of indicators to illustrate how as-of-right hotel development was undermining a number of the city's land use objectives. Hotels were increasingly being developed in areas where they conflicted with the public policy objectives approved by the community and City. In addition to conflicts in Industrial Business Zones, which the City has since addressed, the report identified special districts, 197(a) plans and other articulations of policy that were in conflict with hotel development.

In addition, at that point in time hotels generated a return on investment significantly greater than other desirable uses. This was a particular problem for industrial space as well as Class B and C commercial buildings which are important to the future of the tech sector and other emerging industries—new industries often need older and consequently lower rent space.

**“A growing tourism industry is an important contributor to the city’s economic well-being, and new hotel development is vital to that industry. However, developing affordable housing, preserving Class B office space for high-tech and related entrepreneurs, and preserving and expanding the city’s manufacturing sector and industrial infrastructure are also important policy goals that should not be secondary to the goal of expanding the hospitality sector.”<sup>6</sup>**

While the economics of the hotel industry has been severely impacted by Covid-19, so have the economics of office space and other uses. While the entire market may reset or shift down, the relationships between the competing uses may not. The post-pandemic real estate market is just beginning to emerge and the dynamics between the sectors is still uncertain.

Finally, a special permit was necessary to give the community, its elected officials and other stakeholders an opportunity to identify and seek to address concerns such as parking requirements, access to public transit and services and perhaps most important to develop strategies to support resident employment. Hotels, particularly union hotels, tend to pay better for people lacking educational credentials, than many other similarly accessible jobs, from retailing to food services.

# III. STILL ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

In May 2021, the City Planning Commission certified a zoning amendment that would create a citywide special permit for hotels, an action which Pratt Center recommended in *Room for Improvement*. As part of the preparation for the certification, City Planning retained BJH Advisors to analyze the anticipated supply and demand for hotel space over the next ten years.

## EMERGING TRAVEL NORMS

A primary conclusion of the BJH report was that there will be a deficit of hotel rooms, which suggests that the addition of a special permit process could exacerbate the deficit and delay economic recovery. This analysis was based on historic pre-Covid trends and does not anticipate significant changes in traveler behaviors, such as the normalization of remote work, which could dramatically impact the demand for hotel rooms over the long term.

"Using historic pre-COVID visitation projection data, along with national tourism demand trends and New York City hotel development pipeline information from the Department of Buildings, the report's market outlook analysis evaluates projected hotel room demand and supply growth for New York City through 2035... Based on data and recovery projections for the New York City hotel market, this analysis assumes that the city's hotel market will have fully recovered, reaching pre-COVID January 2020 demand levels, in 2025."<sup>7</sup>

The report goes on to apply the historic growth rates—1% for business travel and 3% for leisure travel—as the basis for its analysis.

But there is considerable uncertainty about the nature of post-pandemic travel, particularly business travel, not only because of health concerns but also the extraordinary acceleration of remote work during the pandemic.

Health concerns will significantly impact how long it takes the city to return to pre-Covid levels of travel as more people are vaccinated, as international travel restrictions



To curb the spread of COVID-19 in early 2020, the City began transferring thousands of homeless residents from the city-run shelter system into hotels across the boroughs like the Lucerne Hotel in Manhattan (page 7) and the Glo Hotel on Fourth Avenue in Brooklyn (above). Photos: mif68/Flickr, Google



recede, and as the city's tourist destinations, from museums to theaters to restaurants, reopen. But health concerns—not only from the current pandemic but from future pandemics and other health and environmental events—may also influence the informal calculus that leisure travelers make when planning or embarking on a trip and contribute at some point towards lowering the historic growth rate. There may be a short-term spike in travel due to pent up demand, but over the long term, there may be fundamentally different assumptions and preferences. Travelers may be less likely to cross international borders and quicker to change plans at the appearance of a public health risk.<sup>8</sup>

Business travel, which makes up 21% of total travel in New York City,<sup>9</sup> may experience even more profound changes because of the surge in remote work, a factor not

fully explored in the report or the Draft Environmental Impact Statement. The experience of the pandemic has clearly changed perceptions about the necessity or value of face-to-face meetings, increased awareness of the option for remote meetings, and raised skill levels and competencies in the logistics of remote work. This is not to say people may not prefer face-to-face work for many components of their work, but rather that the overall calculus and judgment calls about how often and under what circumstances (such as meetings with clients vs internal meetings with other employees) people travel for work will be different.

In addition, corporate travel policies are changing:

- "Business travel will take longer to recover, and even then, we estimate it will only likely recover to around 80 percent of pre-pandemic levels by 2024. Remote work and other flexible working arrangements are likely to remain in some form post pandemic and people will take fewer corporate trips."<sup>10</sup>
- "The US pre-pandemic...trade show and exhibition industry will be permanently changed by COVID-19, along with smaller events like corporate meetings... Hybrid meetings will be the norm as opposed to the exception. People can attend face-to-face or virtually."<sup>11</sup>
- "Deloitte reports that, with COVID, companies face an increased burden of proof to demonstrate that business travel is necessary. This will continue to lead to significant declines in business travel."<sup>12</sup>
- 'After living without travel for over a year...some big companies are re-evaluating exactly what role it will play...' "I think there's going to be a higher bar for travel in the future," said Eric Bailey, global director of travel at Microsoft Corp.'<sup>13</sup>

An additional and growing consideration may be corporate commitments to reduce environmental footprints, particularly reducing carbon emissions.<sup>14</sup> A 2018 study found that between 2009 and 2013, tourism's global carbon footprint accounting for about 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions. This is not to suggest that all companies are going to stop business travel but that climate-friendly considerations are going to impact their decision-making and probably lead to greater scrutiny and less travel.

- "Commitments companies have made to reducing emissions are emerging as one of the biggest threats to travel, as corporate leaders evaluate how best to return."<sup>15</sup>
- "Sure, there's something magical about meeting face to face, but in an age of pretty good video-conferencing, there isn't magic enough to justify the extreme environmental costs of routine flight."<sup>16</sup>

Basing growth projections on slightly modified healthy pre-COVID growth rates is too optimistic.

## SPECIAL PERMIT IMPACTS: FEWER CONFLICTS, GREATER LOCAL EMPLOYMENT, STABLE GROWTH AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

The special permit requirement will provide an opportunity for host communities to participate in the planning process for the hotel which could have significant impacts in their neighborhoods, to promote local hiring of hotel employees, and to add some stability to the hotel development sector.

Prior to the pandemic, New York's hotel industry was going through an extraordinary boom:

"In 2019, New York City drew a record 66.6 million visitors, a 2.4 percent increase over 2018 and reflective of an uninterrupted 12-year run of consecutive increases in visitor counts. 28 million of those visitors stayed in hotels in the city, accounting for over \$13 billion in direct and indirect business sales..."

...2019 also saw the continuation of an unprecedented boom in hotel development in New York City that had begun in 2007 and has added over 54,100 hotel rooms since that year, a 73 percent increase in supply. This growth was remarkable for its endurance as the five years between 2015 and 2019 saw over 21,000 hotel rooms come online in the city, a 40 percent increase over the number of rooms that came online during the previous five-year period."<sup>17</sup>

But by January 2021, in response to the dramatic drop in tourism and demand for hotel rooms, Governor Cuomo, with the support of the Real Estate Board of New York and the Hotel Association of New York City, proposed legislation to override local zoning and allow the conversion of hotels to



residential uses. The memorandum in support of the proposed legislation stated that "New York State has an urgent and significant interest in addressing the high commercial vacancy rates and underutilized hotel properties."<sup>18</sup>

Vijay Dandapani, president of the Hotel Association of NYC, said: "The hotel industry is the most stressed industry in the commercial property sector due to the near total evaporation of revenues since March 22....(T)he Governor's proposal that seeks to make it easier for owners and operators of hotels to maximize the value of their severely negatively affected assets will be welcomed by many."<sup>19</sup>

The boom/bust dynamic is familiar in real estate development, and its consequences are felt beyond developers by the communities hosting the development. In this current boom/bust cycle, distressed hotel operators have resorted to renting their otherwise vacant hotels to the City and to organizations serving the homeless.

While addressing the needs of the city's most vulnerable residents should be one of the City's highest priorities, those services should be intentional and planned in the best interest of the homeless, not a market-driven afterthought. A consequence of the current hotel rescue-plan process has been the unplanned concentration of homeless people in areas that previously experienced significant hotel development but do not have adequate social services. A particularly extreme example of this is the ten-block stretch along 4th Avenue between 25th Street and 35th Street in Brooklyn.

A special permit requirement will not stop hotel development. Some hotels are currently beginning the certification process in areas where a special permit is already required such as an M1 zone and the East Midtown Special District.

But a special permit requirement would tend to weed out weaker developers and less certain or riskier projects. The exclusion of these types of proposed hotel developments would curb the boom/bust dynamic and lead to more stable growth. It would both alter the calculus behind the decision to develop a hotel to deter some development and it would create an opportunity for the community and elected officials to scrutinize the proposal. This additional scrutiny and negotiation could lead to contingency planning such as for "warning notices" of conversions (similar to the warning notices required by the Department of Labor before a large layoff of employees). A warning notice would create an opportunity to put homeless services in place before a conversion. It could even lead to contingencies which prioritize affordable housing.

The current unregulated development of hotels clearly leads to numerous land use conflicts, much of which could be addressed through the special permit process.

The Brooklyn Way Hotel on Fourth Avenue between 25th and 26th streets is one of the hotels repurposed to a homeless shelter amid the pandemic. Image: Google Maps

The Grand Hyatt is an example of an older hotel being redeveloped and reconceptualized. The tower (rendering shown at right) replacing the hotel on 42nd Street in Manhattan will include 2.1 million square feet of Class A commercial office space, a new 500-room Hyatt-operated hotel on the upper floors of the building, and 10,000 square feet of retail on the ground floor and cellar levels.

Image: Skidmore Owings & Merrill



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The Department of City Planning's Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) on Citywide Hotel Text Amendment concludes that the special permit requirement would have a significant economic cost in lost tourism and jobs. It projects that the special permit requirement could reduce total hotel development by as many as 47,000 rooms and 18,970 direct jobs.<sup>20</sup>

One obvious but flawed strategy for addressing some land use concerns without risking a gap between hotel supply and demand would be to carve out the areas where the gap will be greatest, which is essentially Manhattan.

This strategy would be contrary to at least two decades of City economic development policy that sought to extend the benefits of the tourist economy beyond Manhattan. A "Manhattan carve out" would make development more attractive in Manhattan but less attractive in the other boroughs, areas where there has been significant growth in tourism over the past few years.

It is important to recognize that the gap between the "No Action" and "With Action" scenarios may not be caused by the land use regulations but by the interplay of land use and an evolving business model. It appears that several new hotel developments are moving forward in areas that already require a special permit, demonstrating that the requirement is not so onerous as to eliminate all development. In

addition, there is a general decline in *Revenue Per Available Room*, and some hotels with successful histories are being repurposed. The Grand Hyatt on 42nd Street is just one very visible example of a redevelopment and reconceptualization.

"While hotel owners in the four outer boroughs are considering converting their hotels for use as permanent homeless shelters, owners of older hotels in Manhattan that were marginally profitable before COVID-19 are considering redevelopment and/or conversion to residential, office, or institutional uses. During stakeholder interviews, some industry stakeholders predict that up to 30 percent of New York City's hotel rooms will not reopen."<sup>21</sup>

The possible oversupply of hotels and the growth of lower margin, less well capitalized hotel operations poses a threat to the stability of the industry and its characteristic high-quality jobs. The industry is already seeing a decline in *Revenue Per Available Room*. At some point, this decline will influence industry wages.

The City should seek to address the obstacles confronting the hotel component of the tourism industry with tools other than an exception from the special permit. Hotels are a critical piece of the infrastructure that makes tourism economic activity possible. But hotels themselves may be vulnerable, and this vulnerability is weakening the entire ecosystem.<sup>22</sup>

# IV. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

1

## A hotel special permit will help address community concerns

Tourism presents challenges to the quality of life of many city residents, particularly hotels, which are an obviously essential piece of the tourism infrastructure. Much of this conflict can be remediated through better planning during the development process to address community concerns, which would be achieved with the creation of a special permit. In addition, to the extent communities remain negatively impacted by hotel development, they should also benefit from the employment opportunities generated by the development.

2

## A hotel special permit could anticipate services for the homeless and other policy objectives

The City should explore ways to “bake in” strategies to advance public policy by including the provision of services for the homeless in the event the hotel fails and creates a reuse opportunity, including for permanent affordable housing. A pilot program is now being developed by the New York State Division of Housing And Community Renewal that will support the acquisition of vacant hotels for reuse as affordable housing.

3

## Carving out some areas from the special permit’s coverage risks undermining citywide tourism growth

Carving out some areas from the proposed citywide special permit would put the remaining areas at a disadvantage in terms of hotel investment and the employment and other potential benefits they might provide. This would conflict with long-term city policy to spread the economic development benefits of tourism to all five boroughs.

4

## Land use strategies alone will not address the industry's challenges

While more tourists want to come to New York, the return on investment in hotel development and operations may not be sufficient to incentivize the additional supply. The city could lose out by not capturing the tourist dollars, jobs, tax revenue and all the other external benefits generated by hotel development that could otherwise be gained. The city should explore how best to stabilize and incentivize the hotel sector beyond its land use tools and through alternative public sector interventions.

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22. The situation where a critical piece of an industry’s ecosystem is weakening and threatening the entire ecosystem is not uncommon. In the fashion industry the loss of local manufacturing is weakening the design and other components. In the food industry, the shortage of cold storage and co-packing businesses is an obstacle for many small and mid-sized companies. In the bio-tech industry, the city identified wet-labs as a missing element but essential element of the bio-tech infrastructure.

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