Brooklyn Library locations sold to real estate developers

Isaac Finn
20 July 2015

The administration of New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio continues to sell public property to real estate developers, most recently with the decision last week to sell two library locations.

On July 15, Brooklyn Community Board 2 voted, amid protests from neighborhood residents, to approve the sale of the Brooklyn Heights Library location for $52 million to the Hudson Companies. Protesters waved fliers and chanted "shame on you," following the Community Board vote for the library building to be demolished and replaced by a luxury residential tower featuring 139 housing units, along with a branch library on the building's bottom floor.

Some provisions of the agreement are that a $2 million reserve fund be established for future building repairs, and that the new libraries have the same floor space as the original library. It is unclear if the floor space will include the same footage for the Brooklyn's well-known Business Library, now housed in the same building as the Brooklyn Heights Library, or the current libraries' basement and back office areas.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) has also been written guaranteeing that Hudson will build 114 off-site affordable housing units in Brooklyn's Clinton Hill neighborhood before breaking ground at the Brooklyn Heights location.

Community Board member Eric Spruiell admitted in an earlier hearing that the MOU provides minimal assurance that the Hudson Company will go through with the arranged plan. He stated that developers often "say something now, but somewhere along the line they may change what they agreed to before."

Brooklyn Public Library President Linda Johnson has claimed that the Brooklyn Heights branch requires repairs that would cost $9 million, but because of the valuable location, funds from the sale of the building could be used to benefit other branches in Brooklyn.

In addition, city officials announced earlier this month the sale of the Sunset Park Library location, also in Brooklyn, to the nonprofit developer Fifth Avenue Committee. Under the stated plan, the library would be expanded to roughly double its size, with an additional 49 housing units built on top.

The announcement of these plans, part of a plan to supposedly build 3,740 affordable housing units in New York State, including 2,500 in New York City, drew criticism from Sunset Park residents, who fear the program is an attempt attract more affluent renters and push out current neighborhood residents. Protesters shouted "Affordable for who?" and "Stop gentrification!" Residents were also angered by the fact that their local library would be closed for the duration of the construction, which is estimated to take two years.

The decision to sell the Brooklyn Heights and Sunset Park library locations is part of an ongoing strategy—initiated under the administration of Michael Bloomberg and continued under de Blasio—of utilizing the funding crisis of New York City libraries to open up their locations to developers.

This policy has already devastated New York's library system, with the demolition of the famous Donnell Library Center in Manhattan in 2008. The Donnell Library, after seven years of being closed, is now planned to reopen at a third of its former size and inside the same building as a luxury hotel.

De Blasio has played a particularly duplicitous role in these developments. He stated during his 2013 election campaign that he would defend public facilities from real estate developers, but since taking office, he has allowed library locations to be sold.

The city's 2016 budget, after years of major budget

© World Socialist Web Site

cuts for libraries, includes an increase in operating and capital funding of $378 million and $46 million respectively. This amount barely scratches the surface of the needs of New York's three library systems—Manhattan, the Bronx and Staten Island; Brooklyn; and Queens. Library funding was reduced between 2002 and 2014. According to the Center for an Urban Future, the library system requires an estimated $1.1 billion for maintenance costs alone.

The de Blasio administration aims to maintain a progressive veneer by providing the library system with slightly more funds and building a negligible number of affordable housing units, even while the mayor opens up library locations to developers and real-estate speculators.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site