



Morningside Heights Empty Storefronts and Community Needs Report

**Prepared by the Morningside Heights
Community Coalition**

mhccnyc.org
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December 05
2019

ABOUT MHCC

The Morningside Heights Community Coalition (MHCC) is an alliance of local residents, organizations, businesses, and other stakeholders committed to maintaining and improving our neighborhood in Upper West Manhattan.

Our membership represents a wide array of personal and professional backgrounds, ages, and advocacy experience. We learn from and support each other in advancing community-focused activities and policy proposals.

Our three main priorities are:

- limiting luxury over-development in our neighborhood
- Promoting local affordable housing
- Preserving the unique character and quality of life of Morningside Heights

MHCC mobilizes and maintains open lines of communication with our community members, engages with elected and appointed government officials, organizes events, and recognizes community members who make positive local impacts.

More information about MHCC is available on our website mhccnyc.org or through our Twitter account @mhccnyc

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Small businesses in New York City are shutting down at an alarming rate. Across the five boroughs, the citywide retail vacancy rate increased by 45% from 4.0% in 2007 to 5.8% in 2017. Rates of vacancies are higher in the outer boroughs than in Manhattan; however, the *growth* in vacancy rates in Manhattan remains troubling and outpaces that in Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx. The empty storefronts left in the wake of closed businesses represent not only the deprivation of formerly available goods and services but also the loss of communities in which these "mom and pop" stores play an important part.

The social forces leading to the closure of stores and businesses are powerful and complex. Not only do small businesses today face intense competition from large chains and online retailers, commercial rents have skyrocketed across Manhattan's retail corridors by as much as 89%. The Morningside Heights Community Coalition has decided to respond proactively to the crisis of empty storefronts in our community.

The Morningside Heights Empty Storefronts and Community Needs Report, prepared by MHCC, consists of the results and analysis of the MHCC Community Needs Survey, which sought to determine what Morningside Heights residents viewed to be critical needs in our community. The survey was issued to more than 1200 MHCC members, with over 200 individuals completing the survey online, of which an estimated 85% reside within the geographical boundaries of Morningside

Heights. Respondents were asked to rank preferences for small business types that they would like to see within the community: stores, services, entertainment venues, and restaurants. Respondents were also provided the option to submit free-form responses.

According to the respondents, the most highly-desired stores in Morningside Heights include (in the following order) women's clothing stores; thrift stores; home and garden stores; children's clothing stores; and dry cleaners. The most highly-desired services include urgent care centers; spaces for yoga, T'ai Chi, or bodily movement classes; after-school childcare centers; community meeting spaces; and senior centers. The most highly-desired cuisines to be represented by neighborhood restaurants included Mediterranean and Greek; Middle Eastern; Indian; Japanese; and Mexican cuisines. Residents also indicated a strong interest in a local movie theater, as well as for vegetarian, vegan, pescatarian, Kosher, and Halal restaurants.

Free-form responses evinced some general themes among respondents concerning their general attitudes on the development trends in Morningside Heights. In particular, respondents noted:

- "You should not have to leave your neighborhood to buy someone a gift."
- "...need a second hand clothing store we can communally support."
- "Locally owned businesses. No more chains and franchises!"
- "Workshop place for learning new skills."
- "Theater that shows docs and foreign films."
- "Co-op that works with the farmer's market in selling fresh food."
- "Columbia focuses on needs of transient students, not long-term residents."

Overall, MHCC is well-positioned to highlight the needs of community members and to engage key players in Morningside Heights who can play a role in crafting solutions the empty storefronts problem. Given the ongoing nature of the empty storefronts problem in Morningside Heights, the Morningside Heights Empty Storefronts and Community Needs Report report marks the beginning of our work in combatting high rates of commercial vacancies in our community. By making the needs and preferences of our community known, we hope to contribute to the development and resilience of small businesses in Morningside Heights.

METHODOLOGY

Survey Design

An MHCC sub-group began developing the format of the MHCC Community Needs Survey in July 2019, and the survey was released to the public and collected responses in September 2019. The MHCC Community Needs Survey contained seven questions total, of which five questions asked respondents to identify which businesses that they would like to see represented in Morningside Heights, in addition to a free-response field for additional information. Of these five questions, three questions asked respondents to rank their preferences for types of business on a scale of 1-3 (1 being a slight preference to see the business represented, and 3 being a high preference for seeing the business represented). The remaining two questions asked respondents to indicate whether or not they would like to see certain types of restaurants represented in Morningside Heights without ranking the options.

In addition, the survey contained a free-response question and a question asking respondents to self-identify whether or not they lived within the geographical boundaries of Morningside Heights. Full survey data is available in the Appendix.

Interpretation of Results

For the three questions asking respondents to rank types of stores they would like to see, we present top-ten rankings based on the rankings below:

1. Raw score: this ranking is based solely on the total number of respondents who would like to see the option represented in Morningside Heights regardless of strength of preference. The raw score this statistic can be interpreted as an overall indicator of whether or not respondents wished to see the business represented in Morningside Heights
2. Max-preference scores: this ranking is based on the proportion of respondents responding 3 (the highest preference) of all those who would like to see the business represented in Morningside Heights. The max-preference score can be interpreted as a sort of “excitement score.” It measures how enthusiastic those who want to see the business in Morningside Heights are about actually seeing that business in Morningside Heights.
3. Weighted average scores: this ranking calculates a ranking that takes into account the strength of preference of the respondent. It can be viewed as an alternative to the raw score. Unfortunately, the calculation of the weighted average ranking alone is meaningless, as only the order of the options given based off this statistic can be meaningfully interpreted. The weighted average ranked a response of 1 as a weighted value of 1, a response of 2 as a weighted value of 1.25, and a response of 3 as a weighted value of 1.5. In other words, responses of 3 are weighted 50% more than responses of 1, and responses of 2 are weighted 25% more than responses of 1.

For the two questions that did not ask respondents to rank options, only raw score rankings are presented.

RESULTS

This section contains the results of the MHCC Community Needs Survey. The section is segmented into seven sections, corresponding to the questions asked on the survey:

- Businesses in Morningside Heights
- Services in Morningside Heights
- Entertainment Venues in Morningside Heights
- Cuisines in Morningside Heights
- Dietary Options in Morningside Heights
- Open Responses
- Residency

Businesses in Morningside Heights

Question one of the MHCC Community Needs Survey asked respondents to rank, on a scale of 1-3 (slight preference to high preference) with the option to abstain, their preferences for seeing a business represented within Morningside Heights. Respondents had the option of adding free-response comments. The following options were presented for ranking: children's clothing store, cosmetics/beauty store, dry cleaner, electronics store, flower shop, grocery store, home and garden store, jewelry store, laundromat, men's clothing store, pharmacy, shoe and accessories store, shoe repair shop, soft ice cream or frozen yogurt shop, sport and fitness store, thrift store, toys and hobbies store, women's clothing store.

The top ten options are presented below according to the three ranking statistics (from high to low rank):

Raw Score Rank	Max-Preference Rank	Weighted Average Rank
Women's clothing store	Grocery store	Women's clothing store
Home and garden store	Shoe repair shop	Shoe repair shop
Shoe repair shop	Women's clothing store	Home and garden store
Thrift store	Pharmacy	Thrift store
Shoe and accessories store	Thrift store	Grocery store
Electronics store	Home and garden store	Shoe and accessories store
Men's clothing store	Dry cleaner	Electronics store
Sport and fitness store	Electronics store	Flower shop
Toys and hobbies store	Flower Shop	Men's clothing store
Flower shop	Shoe and accessories store	Sport and fitness store

Notable free-response options (frequency): bakery (12), bookstore (11)

Services in Morningside Heights

Question two of the MHCC Community Needs Survey asked respondents to rank, on a scale of 1-3 (slight preference to high preference) with the option to abstain, their preferences for seeing a service represented within Morningside Heights. Respondents had the option of adding free-response comments. The following options were presented for ranking: Afterschool childcare center, Co-working space (such as WeWork or Spacious), Community meeting space, Geriatric medical center or specialist, Gym, Meditation chapel or space, Senior center, Space for yoga, t'ai chi, or bodily movement classes, Urgent care center, Veterans services center.

As this question only provided ten options, the full ranking is provided below (from highest to lowest rank):

Raw Score Rank	Max-Preference Rank	Weighted Average Rank
Space for yoga, t'ai chi, or bodily movement classes	Urgent care center	Space for yoga, t'ai chi, or bodily movement classes
Community meeting space	Gym	Community meeting space
Senior center	Community meeting space	Urgent care center
Urgent care center	Space for yoga, t'ai chi, or bodily movement classes	Gym
Geriatric medical center or specialist	Senior center	Senior center
Gym	Geriatric medical center or specialist	Geriatric medical center or specialist
Afterschool childcare center	Afterschool childcare center	Afterschool childcare center
Co-working space (such as WeWork or Spacious)	Co-working space (such as WeWork or Spacious)	Co-working space (such as WeWork or Spacious)
Veterans services center		
Meditation chapel or space	Meditation chapel or space	Meditation chapel or space

Entertainment Venues in Morningside Heights

Question three of the MHCC Community Needs Survey asked respondents to rank, on a scale of 1-3 (slight preference to high preference) with the option to abstain, their preferences for seeing an entertainment venue represented within Morningside Heights. Respondents had the option of adding free-response comments. The following options were presented for ranking: movie theater, music locale, theater (drama).

As this question only provided three options, the full ranking is provided below (from highest to lowest rank):

Raw Score Rank	Max-Preference Rank	Weighted Average Rank
Movie theater	Movie theater	Movie theater
Theater (drama)	Music locale	Music locale
Music locale	Theater (drama)	Theater (drama)

Cuisines in Morningside Heights

Question four of the MHCC Community Needs Survey asked respondents to indicate whether or not they would like to see a cuisine represented within Morningside Heights. Respondents were able to choose as many options as desired, and respondents had the option of adding free-response comments. The following options were presented for ranking: Mediterranean and Greek, Middle Eastern, Indian, Japanese, Mexican / Tex-Mex, French, Thai, Vietnamese, Greek, Italian, Spanish, Chinese, Caribbean/West Indian, American, Southern / Soul Food, African, German, Russian.

The top ten options are presented below according to raw score rank (from high to low rank)

Raw Score Rank

Mediterranean and Greek

Middle Eastern

Indian

Japanese

Mexican / Tex-Mex

French

Thai

Vietnamese

Greek

Italian

Dietary Options in Morningside Heights

Question five of the MHCC Community Needs Survey asked respondents to indicate whether or not they would like to see a dietary option represented within Morningside Heights. Respondents were able to choose as many options as desired, and respondents had the option of adding free-response comments. The following options were presented for ranking: Halal, Keto, Kosher, Lactose Intolerant-friendly, Pescatarian, Vegan, Vegetarian.

As this question only provided seven options, the full ranking is provided below (from highest to lowest rank):

Raw Score Rank
Vegetarian
Vegan
Pescatarian
Kosher
Halal
Lactose Intolerant-Friendly
Keto

Open Responses

Open responses, edited for grammar and clarity, are available in the Appendix to this report.

Residency

Question 7 asked respondents to self-identify whether or not their place of residency was within the geographical limits of Morningside Heights. The question provided the geographical limits as "110th to 125th Streets between Riverside Drive and Morningside Drive." This question was optional, though more than 200 respondents responded.

Of those who responded to this question, 83% of respondents indicated that they resided within Morningside Heights, while the remaining 17% of respondents indicated that they did not.

CONCLUSION

The Morningside Heights Community Coalition is committed keeping our valued storefronts open and thriving. Empty storefronts deprive communities of services and amenities that contribute to the overall quality of life. These survey results are a step toward identifying and prioritizing community preferences so that we can more effectively advocate with our city agencies, elected officials, building owners, local landlords, and private institutions.

Acknowledgements: the research, preparation, development, data collection, and analysis of the the Morningside Heights Empty Storefronts and Community Needs Report were led by MHCC members Jeremy Shapiro and Kevin Wei, who worked closely with the MHCC Executive Board to write and issue this report. MHCC members gathered at committee meetings to provide initial input and guidance, and the broader MHCC community (nearly 1300 members) responded at an extremely high rate, taking the time to complete and submit over 200 online surveys.