



## **MORNINGSIDE HEIGHTS COMMUNITY COALITION (MHCC)**

# **Affordable Housing at Riverside Church: Seizing the Opportunity**

## **July 2021**

### Introduction

At a meeting on May 19, 2021, leaders of the Riverside Church Council asked the Morningside Heights Community Coalition (MHCC) to submit suggestions for a program for developing affordable housing on the Church's Campus. The MHCC used these guidelines in preparing ideas for the program.

- Gear affordable housing to needy households in the catchment area of Manhattan Community Board 9.
- Preserve historic McGiffert Hall and renovate it for affordable housing.
- Limit new development to moderate heights.

### The Need for Affordable Housing in the Riverside Church Neighborhood

In developing affordable housing at Riverside Church the most appropriate area of housing need to consider is Community Board 9 (CB 9), stretching from 110<sup>th</sup> to 155<sup>th</sup> Streets along the west side. Riverside Church is pivotally located in CB 9 and any adverse effects from development at the Church's campus, such as displacement from existing housing and pressures on public services, will be highly concentrated in the nearby neighborhood.

Key indicators from the 2014-18 American Community Survey reveal the need for affordable housing among residents of CB 9. Many households do not have sufficient incomes to pay for housing and other necessities; half earn less than \$50,000 a year, compared to 43% in the city; and 30% survive on less than \$25,000 a year, as against 24% across the city. Thirty percent of renters (86% of all households) pay over half of their income for rent. In the Morningside and Hamilton Heights part of CB9, rents rose by 34% between 2018 and 2020, the third highest increase in the city.

According to the May 2021 [Morningside Heights Planning Study](#), in the blocks closer to Riverside Church, west of Amsterdam Avenue and between West 122<sup>nd</sup> and 125<sup>th</sup> Streets, housing needs are even more acute among the largely Hispanic, Black and Asian residents. For example, in this area half of the households earn less than \$40,300 a year, compared to a median income of \$50,000 for the entire Community Board district.

Current housing developments in the Morningside Heights section of CB 9, where Riverside Church is located, will do nothing to alleviate local housing deprivation; in fact they will only exacerbate the situation. There are almost 800 apartments either now under construction or recently completed, at five locations in Morningside Heights; three will be high-priced rentals and two luxury condominiums. At rents in the thousands and prices in the millions they are far beyond the means of residents of CB 9 who need housing. Moreover, not a single apartment will be designated as affordable.

In addition to the factual evidence, several indicators and statements support the need for affordable housing in Morningside Heights. Surveys of Morningside Heights and West Harlem residents conducted by the MHCC consistently rank affordable housing as a top priority. It is constantly raised as a pressing issue in the MHCC's Town Hall meetings, committee sessions and tabling along Broadway.

The goal noted on the Riverside Development Committee's website of "Working with our neighbors in Morningside Heights and Harlem to help meet their needs," reflects both the need for affordable housing in Community Board 9 and that some of those needs should be met at Riverside Church. A letter from the co-chair of the Riverside Development Committee to the MHCC on February 19, 2021 averred "that we believe that a majority of our congregation want to include some type of affordable housing as part of our development." The Committee's Community Needs Assessment Study, released on March 28, 2021, stressed the unaffordability of housing and homelessness as key issues in the area served by Riverside Church. Respondents cited a need for affordable housing for families and seniors as well as supportive housing combining shelter and concentrated services.

#### Applying the Findings of Community Board 9 Regarding Affordable Housing

Community Board 9, the government body responsible for urban planning in Morningside Heights, has issued findings in two areas highly relevant to the program for affordable housing at Riverside Church's Campus. One highlights the acute need for affordable housing within the Board's jurisdiction and the other the responsibility of local institutions for meeting that need.

A resolution adopted by Community Board 9 on March 21, 2019 concludes that "...a housing emergency exists in Manhattan Community District 9 and in New York City requiring extraordinary measures to be taken to protect tenants and ensure the right of all New Yorkers to safe and affordable housing."

#### Preserving and Renovating McGiffert Hall

Historic McGiffert Hall, located at the southwest corner of Claremont Avenue and West 122<sup>nd</sup> Street, is next to and owned by Riverside Church. It is now leased to Union Theological Seminary until their new residential building across Claremont Avenue is completed. The Request for Evaluation, the first step in designating McGiffert Hall a landmark, was submitted by the Morningside Heights Historic District Committee to the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) on January 29, 2018, before the building was purchased by Riverside Church. The [Request](#) states that: “McGiffert Hall is significant as a distinct yet contextual work of architecture that bridged two period revival styles...” It adds that; “Situated between these two complexes, (the Seminary and the Church) Allen & Collins (the architects) produced a contextual design that referenced the materials, massing and detailing of both styles.” After landmark designation McGiffert Hall should be renovated for housing in accordance with the LPC’s regulations. A petition to the LPC calling for McGiffert Hall to be designated a landmark has already received over [nine hundred](#) signatures.

### Proposed Program for Affordable Housing on the Riverside Church Campus

Based on the above, the key aspects of a program for affordable housing on Riverside Church’s Campus would consist of the following:

- Designating historic McGiffert Hall a landmark and renovating it for housing.
- Assuring that housing built on the Campus meet the needs of, and is affordable to, low and moderate households within Community Board 9.
- Limiting new buildings to a moderate height of about 13 floors.

Excellent models for developing affordable housing for neighbors in need are close by, including Broadway Housing developments at 155<sup>th</sup> and Amsterdam and 135<sup>th</sup> and Riverside and the West Side Federation for Senior and Supportive Housing development on 108<sup>th</sup> Street between Amsterdam and Columbus.

We look forward to a continued dialogue on a promising future for the neighborhood we share.

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