Columbia University’s impacts on the community of Morningside Heights, Manhattan are undeniable and extend over more than a century of shared history. As a result of the University’s dramatic growth following World War II, many local residents not affiliated with Columbia have faced major disruptions to their lives. The University and its neighbors now have a major opportunity to address these past and ongoing challenges by expanding affordable housing opportunities in our mutual neighborhood, at no cost to Columbia.
BACKGROUND

Columbia University’s major expansion has resulted in the eviction of thousands of local families over the course of many decades.

Those who remain have faced rent increases and significant shifts in local culture and commerce, partly due to Columbia’s ongoing effects on Morningside Heights. These effects erode the quality of daily life for low- and moderate-income neighbors today.

A balanced assessment of this history also illuminates Columbia’s vital role in maintaining the stability of Morningside Heights, in good times and bad. The University’s academic and cultural offerings enrich our community and many residents affiliated with Columbia are esteemed neighbors who contribute greatly to local life.

A new report from city agencies, Housing Our Neighbors: A Blueprint for Housing and Homelessness, strongly affirms that “housing is the foundation for everything else in our lives” and that “we must treat the housing and homelessness crisis with the urgency it deserves.” Surveys cited in the report show that housing is the “number one priority for the vast majority of New Yorkers.” As across the city, the severe lack of affordable housing is the most pressing problem in our neighborhood. This crisis directly undermines an objective that should be of great importance to local residents, employees, students, and visitors: maintaining our community’s diversity.

The following report and proposal was developed by JUST Housing for Morningside Heights, a campaign and committee of concerned neighbors, government officials, and other local stakeholders committed to ameliorating challenges related to the University’s continued growth. This advocacy proposes concrete and uncomplicated actions by Columbia which would benefit both this esteemed institution and its unaffiliated neighbors, at no overall cost to the University.

These efforts resonate deeply with Columbia President Lee Bolinger’s July 21, 2020 Call to Action to Address Racism. This admirable pronouncement stated that “Columbia will engage in not just programs and initiatives, but in a true community-wide effort to remedy deep injustices.”

Morningside Heights community members call for concrete measures which reflect these sentiments and address the major disruptions related to the University’s ongoing expansion and current housing policies.
Reinforcing the diversity of Morningside Heights by enhancing local affordable housing opportunities would be a significant legacy for the Columbia community and for its leadership, as the University commemorates the 126th anniversary of its arrival in Northern Manhattan.

These thoughts are offered in good faith by concerned and committed neighbors who understand and appreciate the University’s role, both in our community and globally. There is profound potential here for the emergence of a more sustainable, enriching, and collaborative neighborhood which can both learn from and share insights with other communities pursuing their own development objectives.

HOUSING CONDITIONS ON THE BLOCKS AROUND CAMPUS

Housing deprivation may be the most acute of the “deep injustices” confronting the Columbia neighborhood. The 2014-18 American Community Survey of Manhattan Community Board 9 (CB9), which runs from West 110th to West 155th Streets along Manhattan’s West Side and includes both the Morningside Heights and new Manhattanville Campuses, revealed that many households do not have sufficient incomes to afford housing and other necessities. Half earn less than $50,000 per year, compared to 43% across the City. A full 30% survive on less than $25,000, as against 24% in the City as a whole.

Thirty percent of renters (86% of all households) pay over half of their income in rent. Local rents increased by 34% between 2018 and 2020, the third-highest rate of increase in the City.

Observers have noted a general shift in rentals away from long-term to short-term tenants, such as students. There are good reasons to believe these disruptive trends continue and are growing.

Reflecting the city-wide findings in Housing Our Neighbors, surveys by the Morningside Heights Community Coalition (MHCC) consistently rank affordable housing as the top neighborhood priority. It is regularly raised as a pressing issue in town hall meetings and other direct engagement with neighbors.
RECENT CONSTRUCTION NEGATIVELY IMPACTS MANY LOCAL HOUSEHOLDS

While there has been increased housing construction in recent years, this development does not serve low- and moderate-income households. Conversely, it has exacerbated the affordable housing crisis by removing sites that might have offered affordable apartments. Almost 800 apartments at five locations have either been recently completed or are under construction in Morningside Heights. Not a single unit is affordable to needy residents of CB9.

Luxury condominiums have arisen on land with air rights sold by Jewish Theological Seminary (minimum price is $940,000 for a studio) and Union Theological Seminary. Costly rentals aimed at students have appeared on 120th Street and Columbia is building apartments for its affiliates at 125th Street and Broadway.

Perhaps the most disappointing example of local trends is at 30 Morningside Drive where, despite receiving $27.4 million in tax credits, none of the more than 200 rental apartments are available to needy households. Rents at this site, previously used by St. Luke’s Hospital, range from $3,000 to $16,000 per month.

With rents in the thousands and prices in the millions, all the new apartments in Morningside Heights are beyond the means of even median-income households.

COLUMBIA’S PEER PROVIDES AFFORDABLE HOUSING TO NON-AFFILIATES

Although local conditions differ, the experience of the University of Pennsylvania shows how a determined urban university can provide affordable housing to unaffiliated residents. In 2000, the University and its partners established the Neighborhood Preservation Development Fund to provide below-market-rate housing in a neighborhood adjacent to its campus in West Philadelphia.

Through this initiative, 400 units have already been developed and all project profits have been reinvested in a local affordable housing portfolio.

A very pertinent finding is that at least 35% of the units are rented to community members not affiliated with the University. This offers strong evidence that “town-gown” differences can be effectively addressed in the arena of local housing development.

In Morningside Heights, the challenges and opportunities are ripe for positive engagement.
Columbia has three immediate opportunities to provide affordable apartments to unaffiliated community members. All three involve properties already owned by the University. Two pertain to specific buildings and the third calls for a change in Columbia’s rental policies.

### Specific Proposals for Columbia University

**Southwest Corner of Broadway and 125th Street:** On the site of the former McDonalds restaurant, Columbia is developing a 34-story tower with 174 apartments. Though intended for Columbia affiliates, it could also accommodate non-affiliated households of low and moderate income.

**611 West 112th Street:** Columbia recently acquired the Maranmay, a vacant, six-story, 24-apartment pre-WWI apartment building, for $25.7 million. Located in the Morningside Heights Historic District, after extensive renovations it could yield 50 or more modern apartments, some of which could be designated for non-affiliates of low and moderate income.

For both the 112th and 125th Street sites, the successful Penn program offers insights and best practices.

**Rent-Regulated Apartments Occupied by Non-Affiliates:** An estimated 300 of the thousands of apartments Columbia owns in Morningside Heights are occupied by tenants who are not affiliated with the University and are protected by New York State rent regulation laws. It would be in the mutual interest of Columbia and the broader community of Morningside Heights if these were preserved as rent-regulated units for non-affiliates when the current tenants leave.

### MHCC and CB9 Have Adopted Resolutions Concerning Columbia-owned Residences

1. Rent regulated units remaining in Columbia-owned buildings should be set aside in perpetuity as a resource available to community families with incomes below the district’s Area Median Income (AMI);

2. In newly constructed or acquired buildings, 30% of all units be similarly set aside.

Besides being an important step in addressing past injustices, these resolutions offer the advantage of promoting community stability in a largely transient neighborhood by providing housing for local residents who need it most.
JUST Housing Proposals Benefit Columbia University

1. They enable the University to realize its commitment “to remedy deep injustices” in its Call to Action, setting a worthy example for other institutions and communities and providing a tangible opportunity for Columbia to support its neighbors;

2. They enhance the stability and diversity of Morningside Heights and nearby communities, thereby improving and enriching the experiences of students, faculty, and other Columbia affiliates;

3. They use existing and planned housing units and do not entail acquiring additional property by the University or the loss of apartments now occupied by its affiliates;

4. They mobilize the powerful resources of the University in addressing the most pressing problem facing the City of New York and Columbia’s immediate neighborhood.

They Also Benefit the Morningside Heights Community

1. They provide affordable apartments to low- and moderate-income community residents not affiliated with Columbia, allowing them to create full and meaningful lives in a neighborhood which has increasingly excluded them due to growing rental fees;

2. They contribute to a more economically, culturally, and socially diverse Morningside Heights community;

3. They moderate the current fixation on luxury development.

4. They foster greater awareness and connections between local community members and Columbia.
PRACTICAL IMMEDIATE STEPS

1. Initiate an open and productive dialogue between the University and concerned community members on how Columbia can best provide affordable apartments to unaffiliated residents in need of housing, and what the University expects from this initiative;

2. Engage the new Community Advisory Council, with its broad mandate and wide representation, in this dialogue;

3. Develop shared criteria, guidelines, timetables, and reporting procedures on preserving or developing affordable housing for non-affiliates.

POTENTIAL ROLE OF COLUMBIA’S COMMUNITY ADVISORY COUNCIL

On March 3, 2022, President Bollinger announced the formation of the Community Advisory Council “to support and expand partnerships and programs with community leaders and organizations in Harlem and Upper Manhattan.” The Council, which is now composed of Columbia administrators and faculty, should also include representatives from neighborhood organizations not affiliated with the University.

Housing is expected to play a key role in the Council’s activities, expressing “an enduring commitment to strengthening our neighboring communities and improving the lives of those who reside there.”

With regard to affordable housing, the Council’s mandate is more explicit, endorsing “affordable housing ventures that contribute to the well-being of community residents.” To realize these aims, the University describes “deploying the most potent resources a world-class university can offer.”

Will these objectives be pursued directly outside the University’s gates?

Along with the University Senate, formed in response to the incidents of 1968, this Council offers opportunities to discuss a wide variety of issues relevant to Columbia and its diverse neighbors. Among them are developing and implementing ways in which our community’s largest landlord can proactively address the affordable housing crisis growing on the blocks around its campuses.
LEGACIES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Columbia’s arrival in Morningside Heights in 1896 helped define our neighborhood as a vibrant, engaged, and notable community. Non-affiliated residents, who began to arrive upon completion of the subway eight years later, further influenced the nature and contours of our shared space.

In the face of recent and anticipated challenges, the Columbia community at large and non-affiliated local residents of Morningside Heights today have a singular opportunity to collaborate in creating shared benefits.

By squarely addressing the current crisis in affordable housing and embracing the proposals described here, Columbia can honor its principles and enhance its role as a local, national, and global leader. This is the vision so effectively described in President Bollinger’s Call to Action. Our shared community is prepared to answer that call.

We will request meetings with a wide variety of Columbia leaders and constituents and can be reached at info@mhccnyc.org. Thank you for your attention and engagement on these shared issues.
Community groups are vital to the uplifting of neighborhood interests. The Morningside Heights Community Coalition and its JUST Housing Committee bring together stakeholders throughout the area to ensure that community needs are being heard as they relate to existing and future housing. The JUST Housing Committee believes, as I do, that we must protect rent stabilized and existing tenants' rights to their homes, as well as increase our housing stock to provide new, affordable units to the area. I look forward to collaborating further with the Coalition to meet these goals.

Mark Levine  
President, Borough of Manhattan

I am writing to express my strong support for your JUST Housing Proposal. Access to affordable housing is critical to the health and livelihood of every neighborhood. Columbia University must make every effort to include affordable housing units in planned real estate development projects and maintain the rent-regulated status of its apartments. This is vital to protect low- and moderate-income residents in need of homes. Morningside Heights must be affordable for residents affiliated with Columbia and those who are not. Columbia and the greater Morningside Heights community will benefit from more affordable housing for non-affiliates in future Columbia Housing developments. I look forward to an ongoing discussion with the Morningside Heights Community Coalition, Columbia University, and other community partners on this issue.

Shaun Abreu  
Member, Council District 7

It is in Columbia’s best interest to uphold their commitment to collaborate with our community to outline a mutually beneficial future for Columbia and non-Columbia affiliates. I do not and will not support any plans that reduce and remove affordable housing from current and future developments. Community partners simply cannot continue to ignore the urgent need for more affordable housing units in our community.

Daniel O’Donnell  
Member, 69th District
APPENDIX 2: MEDIA ADVISORY

RELEASE: Embargoed through October 1, 2022
Contact: Dan McSweeney: dan@mhccnyc.org; Mobile: 202. 486. 1522

Neighbors, advocates, elected officials propose plan to address affordable housing crisis in Morningside Heights

Community rally planned for Sunday, October 2, 12-2pm at 114th & Broadway

Columbia University should preserve existing rent-regulated apartments and include affordable units in new housing

Morningside Heights, Manhattan – Concerned neighbors have established the JUST (as in fair) Housing Committee to raise awareness and suggest ways to address the critical lack of affordable homes in their community.

“This is a crisis in Morningside Heights, as in the rest of New York,” said Dave Robinson, president of the Morningside Heights Community Coalition, the neighborhood’s leading advocacy group. “[The]ifference here is we share huge portions of our community with about a dozen large institutions. We’ve developed an approach in which Columbia University – the largest landlord in Morningside Heights – can make a real and historic impact locally and reinforce bonds with neighbors by directly addressing the affordable housing crisis at no cost to the institution.”

The JUST Housing Report and Proposal to Columbia University was sent to senior University leaders in August. The Committee will follow up to propose candid and positive discussions on how Columbia can help protect local diversity and culture. The proposal calls for Columbia to maintain the rent-regulated apartments it owns in perpetuity and offer them to unaffiliated neighbors of low and moderate income. It also calls for the University to include affordable units in emerging residential projects, whether recent purchases of buildings or construction of new ones.

“Community groups are vital to the uplifting of neighborhood interests,” said Manhattan Borough President Mark Levine. “The Morningside Heights Community Coalition and its JUST Housing Committee bring together stakeholders throughout the area to ensure that community needs are being heard as they relate to existing and future housing. The JUST Housing Committee believes, as I do, that we must protect rent stabilized and existing tenants’ rights to their homes, as well as increase our housing stock to provide new, affordable units to the area. I look forward to collaborating further with the Coalition to meet these goals.”

“I am proud to support the JUST Housing Proposal,” said New York City Council Member Shaun Abreu. “The plan calls on Columbia University to include affordable housing units in planned university real estate development projects and to maintain the rent-regulated status of its apartments. This would promote desperately needed safe and affordable housing and ensure that our neighbors can comfortably remain in their homes. I look forward to working with community stakeholders to make progress on this critical issue.”

“This is a sensible approach for Columbia to truly improve the situation in Morningside Heights,” said Mimi McDermott, a life-long resident of Morningside Heights. “These proposals mirror existing New York State housing policies the University is exempt from. They also offer a way for Columbia to address its long history of evicting tenants through its decades-long expansion. These proposals can improve institutional-neighbor relations and present Columbia with a tangible opportunity to honor its institutional ideals.”
As affordable housing concerns heighten, Community Board 9 calls upon Columbia to preserve rent-regulated units

BY Lucy Brenner, November 30, 2020

In an almost unanimous decision, Community Board 9—a local advisory board for Morningside Heights, Manhattanville, West Harlem, and surrounding communities—adopted a resolution calling upon Columbia and other institutions within the district to preserve rent-regulated units of housing in their buildings during its November general board meeting.

Morningside Heights and West Harlem have struggled with a lack of affordable housing for years. Rent regulation has served as a means of maintaining affordability for tenants in the area by setting limits on the amount that the landlord can raise the rent. The resolution comes amid ongoing real estate development in the neighborhood that has raised local rent prices, a phenomenon only exacerbated by Columbia’s $6 billion Manhattanville expansion, which has drastically increased threats of displacement, placing up to 1,318 units at risk of upward rent pressure...

Morningside Heights Community Coalition pressures Columbia to preserve rent-regulated units

BY Lucy Brenner and Irie Sentner, February 26, 2021

In the face of luxury real estate development and rising rent prices, the Morningside Heights Community Coalition sent a memorandum to University President Lee Bollinger and several Columbia officials on Feb. 1, calling for the institution to preserve the rent-regulated units in its residential buildings as a source of affordable housing for the community. Local residents feel that the preservation of rent-regulated units is vital not only to provide much-needed affordable housing but also to maintain the neighborhood’s diversity and sense of community.

In the 1960s and ’70s, Columbia bought up several residential buildings containing rent-regulated units within the neighborhood. Rent-regulated units are crucial to affordable housing in the area, as they have set limits on the amount that the landlord can raise the rent.

Following the acquisition of these buildings, Columbia and other institutions in Morningside Heights regularly evicted tenants from the rent-regulated units and then rented the units to Columbia affiliates. The statewide Emergency Tenant Protection Act of 1974 attempted to address this issue by requiring institutions to maintain rent regulation for the duration of a tenancy.

However, when original tenants in rent-regulated units die or move out, Columbia can deregulate the rent and raise it to market-rate prices through vacancy decontrol. Columbia affiliates can then rent the units, which are no longer able to serve as a source of affordable housing for the community...
APPENDIX 3: LOCAL MEDIA COVERAGE

Advocates call on Columbia to provide affordable housing to its Morningside Heights neighbors

October 2, 2022 by Caroline Lewis

Columbia University has long provided off-campus housing to graduate students, faculty and others affiliated with the university. But as the school continues to expand its already gargantuan footprint, some neighbors in Morningside Heights are urging the university to provide affordable housing to non-Columbia residents as well.

"We think that's a good way to preserve the diversity of our community," said Dan McSweeney, an organizer with the JUST Housing Committee, a group recently formed by members of the Morningside Heights Community Coalition and other residents. He and others who spoke at a rally Sunday expressed fears of Columbia creating a monoculture and squeezing longtime residents out. "We want to be a real neighborhood and that means that we need to have people living here that have different means," McSweeney said.

One of the largest landlords in the city, Columbia currently manages 150 buildings with more than 8,000 residents, mostly located in Morningside Heights. The JUST Housing Committee held a rally with other housing activists near the Columbia campus at West 114th Street and Broadway, where they highlighted core demands and concerns, as some students wandering past stopped to listen.

JUST Housing is asking Columbia to carve out affordable units for people who are not affiliated with the university in its new developments – including properties Columbia recently acquired on West 112th Street and at the site of a former McDonald's on West 125th Street. They are also calling on the university to preserve existing rent-regulated units even after tenants pass away or move out, and to pass some of them on to community members not affiliated with the university. These proposals were included in a report that the group submitted to Columbia administrators in August.

Organizers said they have yet to receive a direct response from the university. But in a statement, Ben Chang, a spokesperson for Columbia, said, "We always welcome feedback and ideas from our neighbors about how we can help address the needs of our community. We are reviewing the proposal and look forward to continuing to engage constructively with our neighbors, community leaders and elected officials on a host of issues of mutual interest."

The Morningside Heights Community Coalition has been working with City Council members since 2016 to advocate for the neighborhood to be rezoned so that new private developments have to set aside a share of their units for affordable housing. Dave Robinson, the group's president, said at the rally it would only be fair for similar rules to apply to Columbia University as well.

Councilmember Shaun Abreu said he supports the new proposals from the JUST Housing Committee. "This would promote desperately needed safe and affordable housing and ensure that our neighbors can comfortably remain in their homes," Abreu said in a statement provided through JUST Housing. "I look forward to working with community stakeholders to make progress on this critical issue."

Some speakers argued that Columbia has a mutual interest in keeping the neighborhood diverse because it makes it more attractive.

"Morningside Heights is an incredibly special community, and that's not something that's always recognized by Columbia, which would prefer to see it as a company town," Barry Weinberg, president of Manhattan Community Board 9, which encompasses Morningside Heights and other areas, told the crowd gathered Sunday. "Community Board 9...stands with keeping Morningside Heights a real community full of real people."

Weinberg and other speakers also expressed support for the Red Balloon Early Childhood Learning Center, a nonprofit preschool that is slated to be evicted from a property owned by Columbia after being housed there rent-free since the 1970s. "It is going to have a huge effect on affordable childcare in the neighborhood," said Annapurna Potluri Schreiber, president of the school's parent board, who also spoke at the rally.

Potluri Schreiber said Columbia intends to revoke the school's lease at the end of the academic year and suggested it was a ploy to make money off of the space. But Chang, the Columbia spokesperson, said it was a decision "based on our expectations for Columbia-affiliated early learning centers." He did not specify which standards the school is failing to meet but said that learning centers affiliated with the university must "maintain consistent leadership and adhere to other standards set by Columbia."
On a dreary Sunday afternoon, despite gray skies and drizzling rains, the voices of dozens of community members filled the air. Two men played the fiddle as local residents, University students, and government representatives gathered on the corner of 114th Street and Broadway. The cause that led this group of community members to brave the gloomy weather? Affordable housing.

On Oct. 2nd, the JUST housing committee, a recently created subcommittee of the Morningside Heights Community Coalition, held a rally calling upon Columbia to address affordability issues and maintain the neighborhood’s historic diversity. After years of long-standing concerns about the affordable housing crisis, community members hoped to call attention to the impact that Columbia’s real estate development has had on the surrounding neighborhood, including increasing the threat of displacement for local residents.

In a proposal sent to Columbia administrators over the summer, the JUST Housing committee made two demands of the University. First, the committee proposed that Columbia maintain its current rent-regulated apartments—units which have set limits on the amount that the landlord can raise the rent—in perpetuity, a proposal which has long been a centerpiece of the MHCC’s affordable housing efforts.

“There are only a few hundred [rent regulated units] left in the hands of people in the community,” Dave Robinson, president of the MHCC, said. “We want Columbia to preserve those apartments for low- and moderate-income people in the community.”

Secondly, the committee proposed that the University allocate a set amount of affordable units for community members when building or rehabilitating new housing projects. Committee members point to two prospective sites of Columbia development—the southwest corner of Broadway and 125th Street and 611 W. 112th St.—for the University to begin this practice. The JUST housing committee sent its proposal to Columbia over the summer, but its demands have not yet received any response or acknowledgement from the University.

“We always welcome feedback and ideas from our neighbors about how we can help address the needs of our community,” a Columbia spokesperson wrote in a statement to Spectator. “We are reviewing the proposal and look forward to continuing to engage constructively with our neighbors, community leaders and elected officials on a host of issues of mutual interest.”

Members of the JUST housing committee expressed dismay that Columbia has not yet taken direct action and hoped that the rally would foster dialogue. Columbia’s influence on local housing issues dates back several decades. Starting in the 1970s and 1980s, Columbia began to buy up private residential buildings around Morningside Heights for use by its affiliates. At first, the University could immediately evict a tenant upon expiration of their lease. But following agitation within the community, the practice was changed so that existing tenants are now allowed to stay in their leases until they move out or die, after which Columbia can rent the unit to affiliates.

Despite these changes, Columbia’s real estate acquisitions over the past half century have still resulted in the gradual loss of available housing for community residents not affiliated with the University.

“Since the end of World War II, the expansion of the University has been so dramatic that it’s caused the flight—the eviction, at the end of the day—of thousands of families that were not affiliated with the University,” McSweeney said. (continued)
This population movement has led to a gradual demographic change in the local area, as University affiliates increasingly replace non-affiliated community members. This demographic shift has affected both the racial makeup of the neighborhood and its socioeconomic composition, according to McSweeney. On his block, he said, the majority of units are now owned as opposed to rented, an indicator of the growing socioeconomic shift as the neighborhood has transformed into an increasingly expensive place to live.

Andrea Brecker, a resident at Morningside Gardens and member of the JUST housing committee, echoed these sentiments. “The people who move into Morningside Gardens now have to be of an affluence that was not necessary earlier—and certainly not for us,” Brecker said. “Our apartment is now like five times what we paid for it. That’s ridiculous.”

Community members see this transformation of the local population as detrimental to the diversity and vibrancy of the neighborhood. Barry Weinberg, the chair of Community Board 9, argued at the rally that Columbia does not always recognize the “incredibly special community” of Morningside Heights and often prefers to see the surrounding neighborhood as a “company town”—an extension of the University itself.

“The fact is [Morningside Heights] is not a company town,” Weinberg said at the rally. “It’s filled with people, some of which, yes, are University affiliates, but many others are just regular New Yorkers who live in a neighborhood, who care about their neighbors, and who want to keep this place livable, affordable, diverse, and the very kind of special, eclectic neighborhood that it is.”

Members of the JUST housing committee stress that affordable housing efforts are beneficial not only to community members of low and moderate income, but also to Columbia affiliates themselves. They argue that Columbia students gain from the experience of living among and mixing with other, non-affiliated community members.

“It’s a great benefit to Columbia University because it’s providing for its affiliates—specifically its students—a community that’s authentic, that’s diverse, that can enrich their experience while they’re at Columbia because of the different kinds of people that are able to live in it,” McSweeney said.

Residents emphasize that Columbia’s recent institutional growth is not bad in and of itself; rather, the damage is done when that growth becomes uncontrolled and insensitive to the needs of the broader community. The JUST housing committee is dedicated to ensuring that any development that does occur in the local area is carried out in a sustainable and productive manner.

“There’s a lot of room for development in the neighborhood, for better or for worse,” Robinson said. “We want to see that development preserve and create new diversity in the community and new opportunities. And I think that would be healthier for the institutions as well.”

The JUST housing committee’s efforts for affordable housing have garnered widespread support within the community. In local surveys conducted by the MHCC, residents continually stress that affordable housing is a crucial issue for them. And, at the rally, two locally elected officials—assembly member Danny O’Donnell and council member Shaun Abreu—came to share their support for the committee’s goals.

“It is imperative that Columbia step up and do the job they’re supposed to do,” O’Donnell said at the rally. “Honor the people that live here, know that they live in our neighborhood; we don’t live in theirs.”

Looking to the future, members of the JUST housing committee hope to build off of the momentum created at the rally and engage in productive dialogue with the University about affordable housing issues. Through their work, they aspire to foster a Morningside Heights community that is mutually beneficial for both affiliates and non-affiliates.

“The rally is not the end, it’s the beginning,” Schwartz said.
Columbia can and should address the affordable housing crisis

BY Dave Robinson and Harry Schwartz, October 13, 2020

Columbia needs to address the housing affordability crisis facing Morningside Heights and West Harlem, and it has the ability to do so. In May 2016, a group of neighborhood activists founded the Morningside Heights Community Coalition in response to the uncontrolled development of luxury housing. We have held well-attended workshops and conducted surveys of residents that have confirmed the desperate need of our neighbors for retaining and expanding affordable housing. Our September 2020 survey revealed that affordable housing is one of the top concerns of our community members.

The recent history of real estate development in Morningside Heights is notable for its glaring absence of affordable housing. In 2015, Jewish Theological Seminary sold property and air rights to private developers who then built a 33-story market-rate condominium tower and a luxury rental. Later in 2015, Union Theological Seminary sold property and air rights to what would become a 42-story luxury tower with 175 market-rate units that is still under construction. In 2016, Mount Sinai Morningside sold four buildings to a private developer. Together, these four projects will bring over 600 new housing units to Morningside Heights. Not a single one will be affordable.

One possible source of permanent affordable housing is Columbia’s stock of residential apartment buildings. As the largest landlord in Morningside Heights and one of the biggest in New York City, Columbia has an opportunity to protect a critical part of what remains of affordable housing in our community. Columbia bought many private buildings throughout Morningside Heights in the 1960s and 1970s. At first, when the leases of tenants expired, these tenants were subject to eviction; Columbia then rented the apartment to affiliates. After protests and tenant pressure, the law was changed to allow existing tenants to renew their leases and to retain the protections of New York’s rent regulation laws. In addition to limiting rent increases, these laws protect tenants against arbitrary evictions and give them a legal means to address problems with their landlord.

When a non-affiliate tenant dies or moves out of Columbia apartments, the apartment is decontrolled, or removed from the city’s rent regulation system, and vanishes as an affordable housing resource for the community. Over the past several decades, thousands of apartments have been decontrolled upon vacancy, a serious loss for our neighborhood and city. However, hundreds of units are still occupied by non-affiliates and present an opportunity for Columbia to make a valuable contribution to Morningside Heights and New York City by permanently maintaining these apartments at affordable rents with the tenure protections of rent regulation.

Columbia’s action in this area would be in keeping with University President Lee Bollinger’s stated aim of addressing key issues in the broader community that perpetuate social and racial injustice. Back in July, Bollinger announced that he “has asked University Life and the offices of the Provost and Government and Community Affairs to work with students, staff and faculty to, among other efforts: Identify systemic issues in the Columbia community, along with solutions to address them.”

A diverse group of New Yorkers resides in Columbia-owned apartments. Students benefit from the experience of living with the older adults that also reside in these buildings. Reserving non-affiliate apartments for similar people in future generations is far less expensive than building new affordable housing. Continuing this rich living experience is a way for Columbia to aid in preserving the diversity of our Morningside Heights community.
A HISTORY OF DELICATE BALANCE

As with all New York neighborhoods, Morningside Heights is defined by a complicated history of competing agendas. Originally a Lenape hunting ground, this wooded plateau was cleared for agriculture, became the setting for a number of large estates, and attracted numerous institutions, which arrived in several waves. With the completion of the subway, a delicate balance among institutional, residential, and commercial priorities was established in the first half of the 20th century. Major institutional expansion beginning during the Cold War and continuing today — most notably by Columbia University — has caused disruptions to local, unaffiliated residents. As the neighborhood’s largest landlord, which seeks “to convey the products of its efforts to the world,” there are social, cultural, political, and economic implications to Columbia’s local role. Community members admire the University’s ideals. Many desire expanded coordination with Columbia as it continues to influence neighborhood life.

MORNINGSIDE HEIGHTS COMMUNITY DATA (*Statistical Atlas*, unless otherwise noted)

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<td>White: 46%</td>
<td>Hispanic: 16%</td>
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<td>Black: 19%</td>
<td>Asian: 16%</td>
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<td>Local Homes Owned by Columbia: 66% (NYC Council)</td>
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Columbia Expansion, Past Practices and Approaches:
- Residential building purchases and evictions
- Superblock Urban Renewal and “slum clearance”
- Eminent domain

AN INFORMED AND EQUITABLE VISION

The JUST Housing Committee, a group of neighbors and community advocates, seeks to begin a good-faith dialogue with a wide variety of Columbians. Members envision greater mutual understanding and collaboration in stimulating shared benefit with the University.

The most pressing and practical local initiative involves expanding local affordable housing opportunities for unaffiliated local residents.

By amending its rent-regulated apartment practices to mirror non-institutional state policies and including units for low- and moderate-income neighbors in new housing projects, Columbia would contribute significantly to local community stability.

The ensuing benefits would enhance University life, support local diversity, and provide a major opportunity for Columbia to honor its ideals.