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VIEWPOINT

NYU plan makes the grade

New York University is seeking approval to expand its Greenwich Village campus by 2.4 million square feet, an undertaking in the works for five years and now moving through the city's seven-month review procedure.

Late last month, the first entity to have a say, Manhattan's Community Board 2, elegantly spelled out why the expansion is so important:

"NYU is one of the largest, most prestigious nonprofit institutions of higher education in the United States [and needs] to expand and upgrade its citywide facilities and infrastructure to remain competitive," the board wrote. NYU, it added, is "an economic engine, patronizing local businesses and employing many residents."

Board members gushed that NYU supports community organizations, and cited "the value of having a university of such caliber" in the area. So one might expect that they would vote unanimously on NYU's expansion. And indeed they did.

Against it.

NYU's neighbors, it seems, enjoy the Village just the way it is. They need not concern themselves with the benefits that a bigger, better NYU would confer on the city. Greater worries for them are that local sidewalks would be more crowded and that a dog run that their pets use (on NYU property) would be moved about 100 feet.

Their vote was no surprise to observers of the board, which openly acknowledges its agenda on its website: "CB2 is committed to do everything we can to ensure that NYU is not allowed to overwhelm our neighborhoods."

Lest anyone think board members singled out NYU, recall that they voted 40-1 against plans for the defunct

St. Vincent's Hospital, 42-5 against renovating Washington Square Park and 38-0 against the SoHo Business Improvement District. These folks don't embrace change.

Expansion will generate thousands of jobs

Fortunately, their verdicts are advisory. Next up for NYU is Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer, who has worked to broker a deal that all parties can live with. We hope his recommendation rejects the narrow view of his appointees on CB2.

The decision that counts will be made in July by the City Council, which must not pander to NIMBYism.

Opponents of NYU's expansion call for the school to go to the financial district, which would entail leasing space in disconnected office buildings. That would hardly meet the standards of an internationally renowned university. Allowing NYU to grow on its own footprint will draw money to New York from around the globe and generate thousands of middle-class jobs, not to mention provide a superior educational experience.

Would sidewalks get more foot traffic? We certainly hope so. That's what makes cities vibrant.

Higher education is an increasingly important element of the city's economy, and government has wisely nurtured its growth. Expansions by Columbia and Fordham universities have been approved, as has a Cornell University tech campus. NYU has put forth an ambitious but thoughtfully designed plan that incorporates changes sought by critics of earlier versions. It should get the city's blessing as well.