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An Evolving West Harlem, Portrayed in a First Wave of Grant Requests



Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times

As Columbia University redevelops a large swath of Manhattanville, it is required to give \$76 million to the West Harlem Local Development Corporation to address neighborhood needs.

By KIA GREGORY Published: February 5, 2013

Some of the requests conjure images of a worn-down West Harlem: efforts to revive the arts in faltering schools; raise reading and writing skills for kindergarten and first-grade students; and help people with criminal records find jobs.

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Others suggest a neighborhood that now feels different; there are requests to finance culinary classes, a youth soccer program and a tourism group to showcase the area's history and culture.

The West Harlem Local Development Corporation was formed about eight years ago, through a community board vote, to negotiate on the community's behalf with Columbia University, set to redevelop a large swath of the neighborhood. The result was a benefits agreement that, among other things, requires Columbia to give the corporation \$76 million to address neighborhood needs. Now, requests are in for the first of many grant cycles, and though only a fraction will be approved, the proposals themselves paint a nuanced portrait of West Harlem.

They suggest a neighborhood at a crossroads — as it has been for many years now — but in ways that have never been quite so clearly demonstrated.

"It's about the whole quality of life," Kofi Boateng, the executive director of the corporation, said of the breadth of the proposed projects, "and preparing for the future."

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More than 100 pre-grant applications were received by the January deadline, and now a sifting process begins.

When the City Council approved the rezoning plan that cleared the way for Columbia to expand by 17 acres into Manhattanville, which is in West Harlem, the estimated \$6.3 billion project was seen by some as a victory for the neighborhood. Others saw in it a hostile takeover. Local officials and community leaders brokered the benefits agreement — some call it a concession by Columbia — which includes \$76 million set aside in a fund, to be paid out in installments over 16 years.

The corporation's first grant cycle, for this, the first year, will distribute \$2 million to neighborhood nonprofit groups in March.

The agency received 101 applications for various projects, and most focused on education and economic development. Proposed budgets for the projects range from \$5,000 to \$350,000, the maximum, and together total \$18.5 million.

"Most of the projects were very compelling," said Mr. Boateng, who noted that most of the organizations involved had a strong foothold in the community, though some had struggled to hold on to funds and volunteers over the years. "This is going to be a case of feeding five thousand with five loaves."

Selected projects must operate within West Harlem, defined in the community benefits agreement with Columbia as Manhattan Community District 9, which extends south to north from 110th Street to 155th Street, and east to west from St. Nicholas Avenue to the Hudson River. They also must focus on at least one of eight community need categories, defined as arts and culture; community facilities; education; employment and economic development; the environment; historic preservation; housing; and transportation.

One applicant, Skyponics Urban Farming, wants to teach about 25 youths how to raise organic fish and produce using an aquaponic system.

With its grant, a tenant advocacy group would expand legal aid to West Harlem residents fighting negligent landlords. Another nonprofit group would expand its year-round soccer and writing program to include 30 youths. A work force development group wants to train 50 West Harlem residents and ex-offenders for jobs in maintenance and customer service. The Creative Arts Workshops for Kids would hire about 35 teenagers and young adults to create large-scale artworks, including murals, in their West Harlem neighborhood. Through another program, underemployed artisans would train women with a history of incarceration and drug abuse to make jewelry, mosaics and other crafts in order to learn a trade.

The grants, however, are just one piece in the effort to strengthen West Harlem and only one part of the larger hope contained in the community benefits agreement, said Larry English, the former chairman of Community Board 9.

"At the end of the day, you can't judge whether this process is going to be successful until 10 years from now," Mr. English said. "If the only thing is the W.H.L.D.C. gives away \$76 million dollars, in my mind it's a failure."

The number of grant applicants will be whittled down, Mr. Boateng said. Some will move on to the next phase of the process and will be asked to submit more detailed proposals. Others, he said, will be asked to reduce the scale of their projects, "so we're not wasting anybody's time."

"What's important," Mr. Boateng explained, "instead of telling me 'I want to save 1,000 kids,' or 1,000 ex-convicts, show me how you can save 10."

Some applicants, he said, will simply be asked to try again in June.

"We're all going to learn together," he said. "These problems are not going to be solved in one year."

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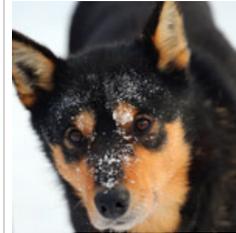
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