President Bollinger Discusses Columbia’s Campus Planning Efforts During Senate Meeting

By Tom Matthews

At an informal Senate meeting on May 2, President Bollinger led a discussion of the key options in Columbia’s current campus planning effort. Neither he nor Marilyn Taylor, chair of the Senate’s Campus Planning Committee, shared the front of the room with him, left much doubt about their preferences.

Bollinger focused on the two areas where the Hudson River that might accommodate a campus-sized development: Riverside South, between 95th and 101st streets, and Manhattanville West, stretching from 125th to 133rd streets and west from Broadway.

“IF we go into this being particularly inclined towards Manhattanville,” Bollinger said, “the theory is, this is our area, where we live, this is our home. Proximity matters a great deal. There are tremendous appealing features to the Manhattanville area—the water, what the city is planning to do with the piers, what can happen with this set of sites, the potential merging over a century or so of Washington Heights and Morningside Heights, not in the sense that we would own everything going up there, but there being something here, a residential facility there. In any event, it is not very far between the two.”

Taylor was no less enthusiastic. The opportunity in Manhattanville, she said, “is not just the assembly of the properties, but rather securing, at an appropriate moment, a shared and approved overarching vision of what’s going to happen here, so that a framework is in place. None of us knows what the building block twenty years from now is going to be. Instead, we’re preserving the future, to figure out what [Columbia] needs, in further pursuit of its mission.”

Bollinger said a Columbia presence in Manhattanville would probably not resemble the Morningside Heights campus. “There is a feeling today that we’ll never replicate that kind of campus again, at least not on Manhattan. It may be that we’ll have to go much further in the direction of an open campus, where there are streets that people pass through, where there is commercial activity on the first three floors, and after that it’s Columbia’s activity. That could be this kind of opportunity to develop the piers and lots of people will want to get to the piers and water, and go through Manhattanville and the Columbia part. If that were true, that there was a lot of commercial activity, we’ll want that kind of campus.”

Bollinger noted “interest” on the part of Mayor Bloomberg, nor Pataki, and Congressman Charles Rangel in a Columbia development in Manhattanville. “Everybody at this point thinks that we do this right, and with the right kind of spirit, the right kind of relationship with the community, this is a big winner.”

Bollinger said, “That’s one of the reasons why we’re pushing this ahead, trying to get a sense of the community at Columbia. Is this something we want to do? Because if it is, things are so well aligned right now that we don’t want to miss this opportunity to dilly-dallying around for a couple of years.”

Discussion identified possible Columbia uses for Manhattanville space, including a new School of the Arts, research facilities for the sciences, perhaps partly shared with near-city College, and athletic practice facilities. It showed no feasible solution to the longstanding complaint that football practice at Baker Field is too far away. In this last idea, including the possibility of community access to the fields, some senators heard haunting echoes of 1968. They also worried about sudden changes in the political climate.

Prof. Peter Marcare, co-chair of the Senate Task Force on Campus Planning, asked for a more systematic assessment of Columbia’s academic demand (perhaps relying on a professional academic planner) to accompany the discussion of the supply of space that is under way. Bollinger took the point, but said he would prefer receiving advice from several groups, including the task force, to relying on a single planner.

Finally, Bollinger acknowledged the obstacles to a major development in Manhattanville. “The cost of this is colossal,” he said, “but what are we going to do? It’s live by dreams. That’s how we make our institutions. Other people buy into our dreams, and help us realize them.”