Using Celebrity Wattage to Fight City’s Planned ‘Garbage Garage’

In the old days, the industrial neighborhood just above TriBeCa was so forlorn that if Martin Sheridan spied someone four blocks away, he could be pretty sure it was an approaching customer.

“I knew they’d be coming here,” said Mr. Sheridan, the silver-haired owner of the Ear Inn on Spring Street. “There was nowhere else to go.”

But for at least three decades now, with less fanfare than accompanied TriBeCa’s renaissance, the factory lofts have been increasingly occupied by artists and Wall Street executives. Now many of these residents — including actors like James Gandolfini, Ben Affleck, Jennifer Connelly and John Slattery — feel they are being visited by a ghost of the neighborhood’s past.

The city is planning to put up a 138-foot tall garage for 95 sanitation trucks on a two-block-long United Parcel Service parking lot. It would cost more than $500 million, and construction is slated to start as early as spring.

The plan would consolidate the garbage trucks serving three Manhattan community boards into a single building on Spring Street between the West Side Highway and Washington Street.

What gives the dispute a dimension that other not-in-my-backyard fights lack is that the...
opponents have spent more than $50,000 staging a competition to have architects draw up alternatives. The winner is a sleeker, cheaper 70-foot-tall building that would consolidate 62 garbage trucks from two community boards instead of three. The building, called Hudson Rise, would include a rooftop park that would connect by way of a highway pedestrian bridge to a planned Hudson River park atop Pier 40.

“We’re no Nimby,” said Jana Haimsohn, a performance artist and neighborhood advocate. “Always in our dealings we look at the needs of the broader community.”

The other twist is the wattage of the celebrities involved. Mr. Slattery, who plays debonair Roger Sterling in the Emmy-winning series “Mad Men,” but in this neighborhood is as much the father of a 10-year-old soccer player, Harry, thinks the city’s plan is misguided and has appeared at public hearings to say so. He does not think involvement of people like him smacks of too much calculation.

“If that’s what it takes — people in TV and the movies — to get people to pay attention, then it’s a good use of that celebrity,” Mr. Slattery said.

The opponents have filed a lawsuit in New York State Supreme Court, based largely on issues like whether the community is being asked to take more than its fair share of garbage trucks. But their principal strategy seems to be to persuade politicians, community boards and the news media that their scaled-down blueprint is preferable to the city plan.

The opponents call the so-called garbage garage a “Stalinist” colossus and say its presence would add more diesel fumes to air already polluted by Holland Tunnel traffic. It would also amplify the urban clamor, block river views and reindustrialize a neighborhood that was gently becoming residential, they say. Across the street from the building, the city is planning to erect a companion shed to hold at least 4,000 tons of road salt that opponents say would leach into roots of nearby trees and into the Hudson River.

The city, proudly defending what it says is a congenial design that won approval by the City Council and the city’s Public Design Commission, argues that it has no choice. Under a 2005 settlement with Friends of Hudson River Park, it has until 2013 to move garbage trucks serving three community boards off an eight-acre peninsula on the Hudson River at Gansevoort Street. The only practical place to consolidate them would be the garage on Spring Street, it says.

Matthew Lipani, a spokesman for the Department of Sanitation, said in an e-mailed statement that the alternative proposed by community groups would require finding and acquiring another site for a garage for the trucks serving the third community board — a Midtown district between 59th and 14th Streets. That would delay vacating Gansevoort and end up costing more than the city’s proposal, he said.

Garbage installations are never popular, and the city has tried to get roughly one garage for every one of its 59 community boards. But high real estate prices and scarce properties in Manhattan often require bundling garages for several communities.

In various documents, the city contends that the addition of garbage trucks near the entrance to the Holland Tunnel and the West Side Highway would have a negligible impact on noise and air pollution and that its garbage trucks would be low-emission models that meet federal exhaust standards.

The opponents say city agencies are too slow to change, even when offered better proposals.

“The Department of Sanitation is like an ocean liner,” said Richard Barrett, a painter and leader of the TriBeCa Community Association fighting the city’s garage. “Once they’re set on a course, it’s nearly impossible to make a quick turn.”
An irony that opponents see in the controversy is that Spring Street was chosen as a result of a settlement with an ally — Friends of Hudson River Park — that required garbage trucks and a salt shed to be taken off the Gansevoort peninsula so that site could be converted into another link in the archipelago-like river park.

The opponents have tried to propose other sites for the trucks of that third district, the Midtown community board, including a riverside space at 29th Street that was originally condemned. That site has since been acquired by Joseph B. Rose, a former chairman of the City Planning Commission, who wants to build a 66-story hotel there.

The area east of the garage, sometimes called the South Village or West SoHo but increasingly known as Hudson Square, was once chockablock with printing and storage firms. In 2003, the city recognized its increasingly residential character by rezoning the area to accommodate dwellings. Ten new apartment buildings have been built, including a Philip Johnson creation called the Urban Glass House, where condos go for more than $2 million. Its river views would be obscured by the city's proposed garage.

The opponents have not been able to gain much traction among politicians, with the defeated mayoral candidate, William C. Thompson Jr., their most prominent backer. They have not had much success with the Bloomberg administration, though there have been recent meetings with Edward Skyler, the deputy mayor for operations.

“We couldn’t get an entree into the mayor’s office until Gandolfini got involved, and suddenly the door was open,” Mr. Barrett said.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: November 17, 2009
A picture credit on Monday with an article about opposition to a planned garage for city sanitation trucks in an industrial neighborhood just above TriBeCa misspelled part of the name of one of the architectural firms that created a rendering of the city's proposal. It is Weisz & Yoes Architecture, not Weisz & Hoes.
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