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Mayor's Housing Push Gets New Overseer

The city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development will set up a new unit, called Neighborhood Strategies, to manage the mandatory inclusionary zoning program and cut red tape.

By Joe Anuta

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The city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development has created a new division that will focus on planning and running the forthcoming mandatory inclusionary zoning program. The agency has also pledged to cut red tape that could shave months off the time it takes to complete affordable projects, Commissioner Vicki Been announced Wednesday morning.

The new unit, called Neighborhood Strategies, will be led by Daniel Hernandez, onetime executive at affordable-housing developer Jonathan Rose Cos. It will take over planning duties, which include preparations for large-scale projects and working on land-use review applications. The new unit will also run the city's forthcoming mandatory inclusionary housing program, which will require developers who gain the right to construct a larger building through either a neighborhoodwide or spot rezoning to include a stated percentage of affordable housing without subsidies.

Additionally, Mr. Hernandez will focus on outreach to tenants, landlords and neighborhood stakeholders. The new division is part of a larger attempt to make the HPD more efficient and coordinate efforts with other agencies.

"Everything is under scrutiny," Ms. Been said, speaking at a breakfast hosted by the Citizens Budget Commission. "Everything is being rethought in terms of how we could do it better."

HPD will also be paring down what Ms. Been referred to as some of the "painful" review processes developers face when bringing an affordable building to market. For example, they currently must go through a lengthy review of affordable apartments built as part of the inclusionary housing program to ensure the units meet a mountain of design requirements. In the future, HPD hopes to make the review much shorter and possibly use random audits to try and keep developers compliant, Ms. Been said.

"That should shave months of time off a development proposal," she said.

The agency is also hoping to bring itself up to speed with modern technology. A case in point will be the scrapping of a decades-old Wang computer still in use and digitizing a number of application processes—for example, making rent roll and income information easier for landlords of city-subsidized affordable developments to file, and for the city to keep track of.