



THE *Morningsider*

Number 2

July 2020

**Health &
Safety
Issue**

Policy, Equity, Community

Inside:

- *Pandemic Responses*
- *Construction Restarts*
- *Public Safety Measures*
- *Community Survey Results*
- *Local Profiles and Feedback*

We've seen a lot of resilience and positivity on our blocks recently.

As a community, we're adhering to COVID guidelines, offering to help each other out, and exchanging greetings on the street more often than before. The current challenges have reminded us that we're connected and that, when push comes to shove, we live in a village.

Over the past few months, we've supported our local businesses, health care providers, first responders, and essential workers. In turn, our community members and institutions have served the entire city with distinction during COVID.

We've voted. [We have demonstrated on behalf of Black Lives](#). We've donated to food pantries, youth initiatives, and senior programs. We have monitored building sites for safety issues.

In short, our community has demonstrated that we're informed, committed, and effective. We should have a strong voice in public health and safety discussions and you can make yours heard [here](#). Decisions about reopening institutions this fall impact our lives directly, and local residents should have a seat at the table as they're finalized.

This is equity and it's a good time to invest in it. The returns to all involved will be significant.



The recent re-activation of the West 111th Street Block Association is just one example of the community spirit which has arisen in Morningside Heights during the current challenges.



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The Morningsider

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Feature: *Health & Safety in Morningside Heights*



Since our founding, MHCC has been acutely concerned with health and safety issues in our neighborhood. Though we've traditionally focused on code and safety violations at local construction sites, other issues have come to the fore in ways we could not have predicted even six months ago.

The Coronavirus pandemic and recent social and economic unrest have motivated our efforts to better understand the views of our neighbors and to ex-

pand our engagement with relevant local stakeholders. These include the 26th Precinct, FDNY Engine 47, and Mount Sinai Morningside.

Recent announcements on pandemic reopening plans by local institutions and the results of our COVID Community Survey have been eye-opening. We have legitimate [concerns](#) about the lack of local input on the proposed return of students, faculty, and staff. Community action may be necessary.

Morningside Heights COVID-19 Community Survey:

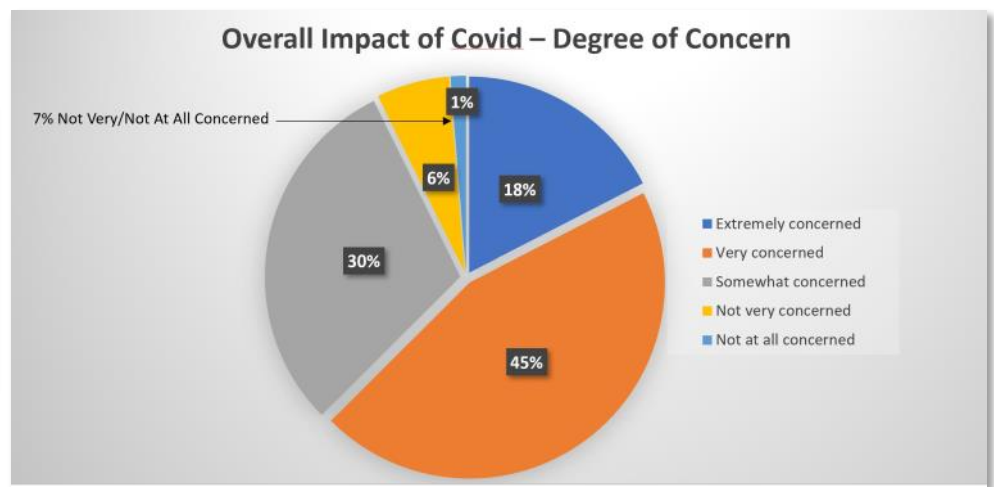
WE ARE WARY OF STUDENTS RETURNING THIS FALL

MHCC developed an online survey in order to better understand our community's thoughts and priorities regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. The [results](#) are particularly important, in light of a July 7 announcement by Columbia University President Lee Bollinger that a substantial number of students will return to campus in September, with residence halls filled to 60%. Our [opinion piece](#) on this issue ran in City Limits recently.

Online surveys were completed by 315 self-selecting MHCC constituents, aged 18 years and older, who participated June 18–30, 2020. Fall 2020 plans for local academic institutions were not known during the survey period and our sample is not statistically projectible.

Summary: After more than three months of measures taken to “flatten the curve” in New York, members of the Morningside Heights community are concerned about the impacts of COVID-19 on their well-being. Top-of-mind is the awareness that COVID is an unchecked health risk and, as some areas of the US have reopened, infections have increased. Respondents' fears are high for a return to spiking rates locally through institutional reopening.

In their own words, survey respondents fear an increase in COVID infection rates in Morningside and West Harlem if students return too soon.



Key Findings:

- The proportion of survey participants not wanting schools to offer in-person classes is significantly greater than those who do. Fear of exposure to the virus is the key concern.
- Respondents want institutions to confer with the community and have independent approval of safety plans by epidemiologists and other qualified experts. Otherwise, students and other personnel must stay away to avoid danger to themselves and local residents.
- The history of poor institutional community relations does not bode well now.
- Students are not perceived as compliant with public health regulations.
- Clear and enforceable safety protocols, including testing, quarantining, control over gatherings, social distancing, and face coverings must be in place at institutions.

We have shared our findings with seven Morningside academic institutions and have requested meetings with all of them. Our concerns were recently reported in [Gothamist](#).

Questions and comments about this survey can be sent to mhccnyc@gmail.com

Health & Safety: *The Bigger Picture*

Let's go back a few years

It's 2017 and Kyle Haver has just moved to Morningside Heights. He and his wife are drawn to the neighborhood's diversity, scenery, and vibrant culture.

One evening, he attends a Manhattan Community Board 9 meeting and listens to a presentation by Jewish Theological Seminary. They want to sell land and air rights to [Savanna](#), a \$5 billion real estate investment manager.

The plan is to build a luxury, "out of scale" high-rise on the low and quiet block adjoining their campus. Frustrated that this non-profit institution will pay no community-supporting taxes on a \$96 million sale, he is struck by the pointed questions posed by a woman next to him.

"She is asking about JTS' refusal to include the community in their plans," he says. "I know this will become a big problem and I want to play a role in addressing it."

The woman raising these concerns is Laura Friedman, representing the newly formed Morningside Heights Community Coalition. With that, the die is cast.

Over the next several months, Haver begins taking digital photos of dangerous demolition practices at the JTS site. He joins the MHCC's Executive Committee and establishes the group's [Health and Safety Committee](#), using his photos (and then videos) to confront the developers and demand changes to their methods.



Haver goes on to organize a cadre of local residents to expand the documentation effort. This lays the foundation for MHCC's Health & Safety

Corps. The group gathers close to 1,000 images of safety violations at several local construction sites. They also develop policy proposals to improve Department of Buildings oversight and mandate community involvement in construction planning and monitoring.

Ongoing violations at local projects include idling trucks, cement run-off in sewer drains, and improper handling of hazardous materials. (See the photo of asbestos removal at the JTS site on page 3.) Problems at this and other sites are compounded, as many of the workers are not union members. Angel Espinosa, 28, is killed in 2018 while on the job at International House. A beam falls 12 stories and hits Espinosa in the head. He had immigrated from Ecuador seven years prior and is a father of three.

"It's a very simple thing," says Haver. "This is about holding developers accountable to the community, not just their shareholders."

The Three Keys

Haver's perspectives underscore how policy, equity, and community are linked in addressing not only health and safety issues, but every aspect of city life. These "three keys" reflect the vision of Morningside advocates. They must also apply throughout the five boroughs.

Institutional and governmental **policies** must allow for **equity** — involvement by local stakeholders — in order to promote healthy and sustainable **community** life. It's an age-old, common-sense approach.

And it works: To their credit, JTS commits to supporting the community beyond its campus. One element of their initiative is a five-year pledge to the Morningside Heights Community Fund. This money will support groups that provide services to local residents.

"During the Current Challenges..."

Fast forward to 2020. These words have become an automatic addendum to much of our correspondence. We use them to contextualize our schedules, procedures, and objectives.

The COVID-Black Lives Matter-Recession Era has shed light on the intractable struggles in many neighborhoods across the country. However, *the current challenges* have also stimulated a spirit of community engagement in many places, along with a productive questioning of the status quo. The adage "with danger comes opportunity" is now a part of our daily lives.



In this context, neglecting the three keys will practically guarantee that local problems ensue. Some people will take note and decide to fight for their neighborhoods.

Speaking of Neighborhoods...

[Morningside Heights](#) has a population of 32,000. The neighborhood is half-white, one-quarter Latino, and 13% each Black and Asian. Notably progressive, the community has worked hard to balance the priorities of its residents, businesses, and institutions for over a century. Since the 1990s, Morningside has experienced significant gentrification and several new luxury residential towers are underway.

“We’ve got to do everything we can to maintain an equitable balance here,” says Harry Schwartz, of the MHCC Executive Committee. “It’s challenging, but our impacts are growing.”

The health and safety of the Morningside community is obviously a shared endeavor. City services and private organizations collaborate in this arena, to varying degrees of integration and success. While there will always be challenges and miscommunications, our community has not experienced major problems with its health and safety agencies. However, the complexities and contradictions of these relationships merit additional reporting.

Official citywide statistics have highlighted diminishing crime rates in recent years. And yet, the last few months have been marked by a spike in crimes across the city. Our neighbor-

hood has not been significantly impacted, though heavy fireworks use has been a concern for many.

Locally, **NYPD’s 26th Precinct**

supports an active [Community Council](#).

“We want to connect organically with the com-

munity,” says Officer Ian DeAbreu, of the 26. “It’s a mutually beneficial way to work.”

He and his partner, Officer Gulzar Hussain, attended a recent block association meeting and spoke with the gathered neighbors at length. Part of what informs their approach is the tragic murder of Barnard student Tessa Majors in Morningside Park last December.

Many members of our community expressed their sympathies to the Majors family. Many also joined a town hall meeting to discuss the social and economic conditions which may have influenced the teenagers who committed the crime. This is evidence of Morningside’s propensity for proactive and holistic community engagement, as is our ongoing support for the Black Lives Matter movement. These facts are relevant and important, in light of ongoing [outcries](#) over police budgets and conduct.

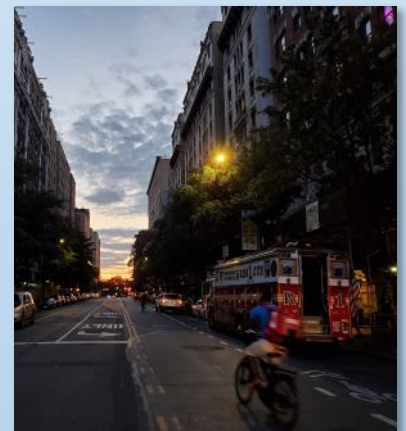
There is [history](#) here.

On the fire and emergency medical front, these have been historic days.

FDNY’s Engine 47 has reported a very high operations tempo, like every other unit in New York. On March 30, city-wide calls reached 6,500, an all-time high.

“Our members continue to serve the city bravely” says Deputy Commissioner Frank Dwyer.

Firefighters and EMT crews have responded while wearing personal protective equipment and maintaining distancing guidelines when possible. For Engine 47, the close proximity of a hospital and senior home have engendered closer working relationships in Morningside.





Our main health care facility, **Mt. Sinai Morningside**, has delivered

life-saving services to COVID patients locally and throughout the city. As a provider, the hospital has been hailed for its impacts and is now beginning a return to normal operations.

“There was a lot of concern during the early COVID days,” says Audrey Madison who handles community relations at the hospital. “By March, we started to see the community support and it really helped us out. We feel more like a family now, among the staff and with the neighborhood.”

Among local developers, institutions, and public health and safety entities, greater awareness of community perspectives is emerging. This trend can propel the three-keys mindset, if enough community members actively support it. There have clearly been concerns with some local organizations in the past. We have an opportunity now to enhance working relationships with them and reinforce the value of local perspectives in their planning and operations.



Carrying it Forward

There is nothing of greater importance than the well-being of a community. It requires constant work and with the collective progress achieved come setbacks. Still, Morningside Heights demonstrates an ongoing commitment to balancing its priorities.

This is not charitable work and it's not always pleasant. It's a responsibility and it requires the hands-on involvement of many people.

“We've had challenges, for sure, but we are resilient,” says Schwartz. “This is a both a cause and effect of our shared commitment.”

On July 7, Columbia announced plans to invite students back to campus in September. There was little surprise that local residents were not invited to planning discussions.

“Our responsibility as an organization is to take the necessary steps to engage with institutions in Morningside Heights when we feel they are not taking the best interests of our neighbors into consideration,” says Friedman. “We have done it successfully in the past and will continue to do so, especially in these tumultuous times.”

“Health and safety come before everything else. They are a top priority. And the most local of issues,” she adds.



Morningside *Lights*



People, sites, and history that make us one of the best neighborhoods in America.



V&T Restaurant & Pizzeria

was established here in [1945](#) by two brothers returning home from the war. Its food, service, and community spirit make it a landmark in an area known for its landmarks.



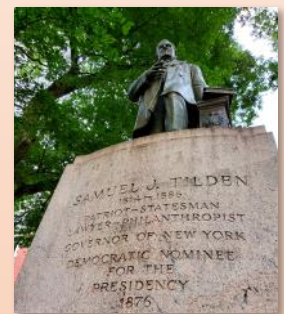
Roger Morse was born, raised, and still lives in Morningside Heights. “This place is a training ground for life,” he says. “While I was growing up, I was exposed to every type of person and perspective you can think of. These [blocks](#) and colleges were our playground.”



The Brotherhood/Sister Sol is based just north of us and provides award-winning [support programs](#) for our young people. MHCC has encouraged contributions to them by our community and seeks to fund the group in 2020.



The 1918 influenza pandemic resulted in only [two deaths](#) at Columbia University, due to the intense hygiene protocols and regimentation of the campus-wide Student Army Training Corps.



The **Samuel J. Tilden Monument** honors a New York Governor who won the popular vote for U.S. president but was defeated in the electoral process. “[I trust the people](#),” he said.

Over the past century, our community’s greatest challenge has been balancing the sometimes divergent priorities of its members. Achieving equilibrium requires the active cooperation of everyone who lives, works, or studies here.

Issues & Campaigns



In accomplishing our [mission](#) of limiting luxury overdevelopment, promoting affordable housing, and maintaining the character and quality of life of Morningside Heights, MHCC is daily engaged with a wide variety of issues and stakeholders. Please visit our [website](#) for detailed descriptions of our work. Here are some updates.

Rezoning: Overcoming COVID-19 meeting constraints, the process of building community consensus for a [rezoning](#) plan continues.

The City Council Land Use Group, with the direction and support of Council Speaker Corey Johnson and our local Council Member Mark Levine, informs MHCC that recent discussions including Columbia, Riverside Church, Mt. Sinai, PA'LANTE Harlem, and Goddard Riverside resulted in positive feedback. More input is under consideration.

The Land Use team will confer with MHCC for further comment and possible changes before presenting the rezoning plan to the Morn-

ingside community. During the review process, the goals of the plan have not wavered: promote as much affordable housing as possible by sustaining stabilized units; provide development opportunities for affordable units where feasible; limit tall towers by selectively imposing height caps; increase community leverage in negotiations with developers; foster greater small business activity and opportunities; and preserve the unique character of Morningside Heights. A final plan version that supports all these goals will be prepared for conducting a mandatory Environmental Assessment Statement, prior to a City Council vote approving the rezoning

Elevator Lobby: In spite of a spending freeze at the MTA, we continue to partner with Morningside Retirement and Health Services, as well as other groups and individuals, to begin community-wide advocacy in support of the addition of elevators at the 125th Street station on the Number 1 subway line. This station presents accessibility challenges and will experience increased traffic due to nearby real estate development projects and Columbia University's Manhattanville Campus. More to follow, including calls for participation.

Issues & Campaigns

Real Estate Developments: Construction has restarted at a number of locations. Over the past several years, MHCC's Health & Safety Corps has monitored work at a number of these sites and observed dangerous conditions. Shortly after our call for a construction suspension during the pandemic, Governor Cuomo issued an order to halt. In the interim, we have regrouped and are ready to continue monitoring. Relevant projects in-

clude the Vandewater, which is nearing completion, a 42-story tower at 100 Claremont, and rental residences on 114th and 120th Streets, off Morningside Drive. Additional projects are possible. These are luxury developments with zero affordable housing. They strain infrastructure and impact our local economy and culture. They often pose dangers to workers and our community members, which have been exacerbated during COVID.

Morningside Heights Community Fund: Established by MHCC in 2017, the MHCF is funded by a local Community Benefits Agreement. The Fund is administered by the [New York Community Trust](#) and is already supporting a number of local nonprofits and informal groups that provide meaningful services to local residents. These include St. Mary's Church and Broadway Presbyterian Church. We have recently requested grant proposals from a number of organizations and will expand giving in 2020 to local initiatives, with a particular emphasis on programs that address race, youth, poverty, and COVID-19. Please [contact](#) us for information.



Affordable Housing: MHCC has prioritized advocacy on a key source of affordable housing in our community. At present, when Columbia University purchases privately-owned buildings with rent-controlled and rent-stabilized tenants, existing tenants are allowed to renew their leases and have the protections of rent regulations. However, when these tenants die or move out with no legal successor, the unit is removed from rent protection programs and vanishes as an affordable housing resource for the community. Hundreds of units have already been decontrolled,

a serious loss for our neighborhood. However, hundreds remain and offer an opportunity for Columbia to make a valuable contribution to Morningside Heights and New York City by permanently maintaining these apartments at affordable rents with tenure protections. A diverse group of New Yorkers reside in Columbia-owned apartments. Reserving their units for similar people in the future is far less expensive than building new affordable housing (also a pressing need). Students living in the buildings also benefit from the experience of living with the older residents who remain.

News & Resources

Articles of Interest: Here's our monthly roundup of media reports.

MHCC Op-Ed: [Columbia and Covid -- Please Don't Love Our Community to Death](#) -- City Limits
[Columbia Manhattanville Campus Expansion Latest Renderings](#) -- YIMBY
[Columbia Frat House "FLJI" Members Make Racist Comments](#) -- Columbia Spectator
[State Senator Benjamin Among Leaders of Bills Against Police Brutality](#) -- City & State
[New York Eviction Moratorium Rules Explained](#) -- NY Curbed
[100 Claremont Site Demolition at UTS Campus Complete to Make for Luxury Tower](#) -- YIMBY
[Housing Eviction Courts Reopening Despite Fears by Tenants](#) -- NY Curbed
[Manhattan Boro President Brewer to Get Covid Test at Riverside Church Site](#) -- The Patch
[Neighborhood Rezoning Might Include Racial Impact Assessment Component](#) -- NY Curbed
[New Evictions Looming as Housing Court Reopens](#) -- NY Curbed
[Fairway Market in West Harlem to Close](#) -- Crain's
[UTS Tower -- Developers Snag \\$250M Loan -- Construction Moves Ahead](#) -- The Real Deal
[COVID Update: Columbia Students and Professors Uncertain for Fall](#) -- Westside Rag

Resources: Morningside is supported by a wide array of [resources](#) that can be of great assistance to residents, business owners, employees, and students.



This month we'd like to acknowledge our New York City Council Member, [Mark Levine](#), who represents the 7th District and serves as Chair of the Committee on Health. As a member of the Progressive Caucus, he leads on issues including housing, education, economic justice, transportation, and environmentalism. He has been a tireless advocate for clarity and

compliance during the COVID-19 pandemic. His support for both rezoning and expanding our Historic District designation has been essential. At an MHCC Town Hall Meeting last fall, he helped arrange a commitment from Council Speaker Corey Johnson for [rezoning](#).

Thank you, Council Member Levine!

Local Engagement



Comments & Questions:

We've received some feedback recently - some good, some not so good. That's as it should be. We depend on the perspectives of our members to improve our efforts. Please let us know what you think [here](#).

Nice job with the newsletter, but there's room for improvement on design. Please include more diverse voices. DM

I am particularly interested in learning more about the potential new grant program being established. SM

Thanks for the Articles of Interest — a valuable service for those of us who do not have the time or resources to surf the net. TK

Why no focus on health or safety issues? KH

Calendar:

As public health guidelines allow, MHCC will plan events to connect and engage our local community. Please standby for a virtual meeting of our **Action Committee** in August. All are welcome to attend via Zoom. We'll provide updates on our **Issues & Campaign** work and share other relevant information. If you'd like to be notified, please [subscribe](#).

Volunteers — A Critical Role:

The vast majority of MHCC's work is carried out by volunteers. These are local residents, business owners, employees, students, and even visitors who want to see our neighborhood thrive. We are grateful to them.

Should you wish to become [involved](#), consider helping us monitor local construction sites for health and safety violations. This work, described in our feature article, is vital to local livability.

And...Action!

Please send your [note](#) to President Bollinger at Columbia and let him know your thoughts on a September reopening of the school.

NYC COVID guidelines, are [here](#).

Don't forget to participate in the 2020 [Census](#), which can help with local funding and policy decisions.

p. 13 Diversion

June: *Morningside Hits*, by Robert F. Stern

Congratulations to our Crossword Contest winner, Jeff Kraus. He not only completed the puzzle, he improved upon one of the answers! As he wrote with his submission, "Thank you for this thing. Definitely not NYT rules, and man, hard to get through the locally inspired homonyms and unexpected twists."

Jeff's was the only entry we received. He chose the \$50 gift certificate to Samad's Gourmet Deli on Broadway. You can still try to solve the puzzle, posted [here](#). Click [here](#) for the solution. At right is a photo of Jeff in western Mongolia during a recent visit.



July: Meet me at...

Local painter Anne Grossman is frequently seen sketching locations in our neighborhood in her unique style. Her Instagram page, [annesgrossman](#), features many great images that will be familiar to Morningsiders.

Our challenge this month: The first five readers to email us and correctly identify the shop below will receive \$10 gift certificates to it. Just use one word. Ready, set, [go](#)!

