

Council to Weigh Tougher Landmarks Law

By ROBERTA K. GRATZ

The Landmarks Commission has scheduled hearings tomorrow to give long-awaited consideration to a major re-amping of New York's landmarks preservation law.

The proposed law change would greatly expand the powers of the Landmarks Commission and allow for the first time designation of parks and interior spaces. It is considered by some observers as "dramatic evidence of the growing concern for preservation in communities all over the city."

The legislation is jointly sponsored by Majority Leader Thomas J. Cuite (D-Bklyn) and Councilmen Carter Burden (DL-Man.) and Edward L. Sadowsky (DL-Queens) and is being considered by the Charter and Government Operations Committee, of which Sadowsky is chairman.

No Opposition
Council spokesmen indicate the legislation enjoys widespread council and public support and is not expected to encounter much vocal opposition.

"The bill provides the city with a very reasonable way to preserve its treasures," noted Park Administrator Richard Clurman, whose department will be most directly affected by the designation of scenic landmarks.

"In the past," Clurman added, "important things have been lost to ravenous appetites and now to be against the new law is like being against virtue."

The major provisions of the new law would do the following:

Eliminate the restriction that allows the commission to consider new proposals only during six-month periods every three and a half years.

"This is the most significant provision," notes Kent Barwick, executive director of the Municipal Art Society, a prime mover in the legislation. "Now," Barwick adds, "the landmarks commission will be able to hold hearings on its own schedule like every other municipal commission does."

Allow for landmark designation of publicly owned scenic landmarks, such as Central or Prospect Parks which are now nationally but not locally designated landmarks.

"When I first heard of this proposal," Clurman says, "I obviously saw it as a circumscription of our department's power but on further thought I felt that it was in the public interest to prevent further despoiling of public land."

Allow for designation of

interior spaces, such as the great hall of the Metropolitan Museum or the main room of Grand Central Station. As of now, only a building's exterior may be designated and protected from alteration or demolition without commission approval. Some buildings, observers have long noted, are more worthy of interior designation than exterior. Most often cited is the now demolished Metropolitan Opera House which was only distinguished on the inside.

Specify that all commission reports on city-owned buildings be published in the City Record. Reports on privately owned landmarks have always had to be made public but those on city properties only had to be submitted to the Mayor and the appropriate agency.

When the commission decided unfavorably on the Metropolitan Museum's plans for the Lehman Pavillion addition, the report was never released but was brought to public attention after being stolen from Park Dept. files. The new provision would eliminate such secrecy.

"The bill has everything we hoped for," commented Landmarks Commission chairman Harmon Goldstone.

Asked why it was so long in coming, Goldstone noted:

"The only question was if the commission could handle new authority with its limited staff and budget. But now that's been solved because our staff has increased in a year from 15 to 26 and our budget has gone from \$300,000 to \$450,000."

Last January, a New York Post series focused on the weaknesses of the 1965 landmarks law and the apparent reluctance of the commission

to exercise its limited powers in the face of strong real estate resistance.

Yesterday, Goldstone conceded that The Post articles "certainly helped" move the legislation forward by "focusing on some of these problems."

Added Barwick of the Municipal Art Society, whose efforts toward landmark law reform until the past year had been intense but mostly

ignored: "I don't think the public really knew before those articles what the real failings of the law were."

Barwick also noted that a major new citizens committee has been formed to "push for sounder landmarks legislation." Called the Citizens for a Sensible Landmarks Law and headed by Whitney North Seymour, former president of the Assn. of the Bar of the City of New York, the group so far includes "125 leading citizens of the law, arts and commerce," says Barwick.