The Need for Manhattanville

BY BRIAN C. KRISBERG ’81
PRESIDENT, COLUMBIA COLLEGE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

As I drove my 78-year-old mother to my 10-year-old son’s travel hockey game recently, she asked me what I planned to write about next in this column. I quickly threw out a couple of ideas, to which she responded with a simple shake of her head and said, “No, why don’t you tell them what you think about that expansion idea?”

Her suggestion seemed particularly timely given the late September announcement of an agreement between Columbia University and the Borough of Manhattan on a series of financial and other commitments from Columbia to benefit the West Harlem community as it relates to the planned Manhattanville campus. The press release from Manhattan’s borough president stated in its headlines:

Borough President Scott Stringer Announces Agreement with Columbia University to Protect and Enhance West Harlem Community as Part of Columbia Expansion Proposal
Historic Agreement Includes Significant Investment by Columbia in Affordable Housing, Open Space, Sustainable Development and Community Resources

The planned expansion is a smart and necessary business decision. Finally, the athletics department, which has not been the beneficiary of any capital projects in literally decades, may have the opportunity to address some of its long list of needs.

Columbia has become, in many ways, a corporate style enterprise. It maintains a “AAA” rating from the bond rating agencies and is one of New York City’s largest employers. Its actions and inactions are scrutinized by the press and pundits from all walks of life. It is run by talented professionals and officers with oversight from a devoted board of trustees. These individuals have a responsibility to run this great academic institution in the best interests of a wide variety of stakeholders, be they students, faculty, alumni, staff or parents. Viewed in this manner, the planned expansion of the campus is simply a smart, and necessary, business decision.

By now, you have probably figured out where I come out on Manhattanville. I am an unabashed supporter and think that the expansion cannot happen soon enough for our students. Certainly the University must be mindful of and responsive to the needs of the West Harlem community. Given the history of relations between Columbia and its neighbors, Columbia must go to the extra yard in generously providing its resources and expertise so Manhattanville becomes a “win-win” for all involved. Only time will tell whether the agreement announced in late September is the first step in forging new and improved connections between Columbia and its neighbors and surrounding businesses. The Manhattanville campus, with its sense of new possibilities and horizons for our students and faculty, has the potential to energize and excite the College and University communities for many years to come.