

Testimony of LANDMARK WEST!
Before the NYC Council Transportation Committee
Regarding Intro 363-A, Amendments to News Rack Regulations
June 23, 2004

Landmark West! is an award-winning, community-based nonprofit organization working since 1985 to preserving the best of the Upper West Side's architectural heritage from 59th to 110th Street between Central Park and Riverside Park.

We have reviewed the proposed changes to Section 19-128.1 of Chapter 1 of Title 19 of the Administrative Code now before the Committee on Transportation of the Council, and have the following comments and recommendations.

Over the last decade and more, Landmark West!, Community Boards, City agencies and community groups across the City have been winning back control of our streetscape. A wonderful example in our part of Manhattan is West 72nd Street, where canopies were banned and removed, historic "bishop's crook" street lamps installed, new granite curbs and sidewalks built, parking meters replaced by widely-spaced muni-meters, and signs and awnings brought into compliance with both zoning and landmarks regulations.

In addition, throughout the City, the Department of Transportation has done a remarkable job simplifying street signs and other aspects of our visual environment – work which is too often un-lauded in public.

Similar efforts are being made elsewhere on the Upper West Side and throughout the city. Improvements in our visual landscape have been remarkable to an extent it would have been hard to imagine even two decades ago.

Sadly, one area we New Yorkers are constrained by Federal law is regulation of news racks. We think there is no question that they should be banned throughout the City, but certainly at the very least within historic districts. They add materially to visual clutter, and block sidewalks, collect litter, and generally degrade their environment.

Since Federal law makes this impossible, the City has taken on regulating these news racks, and we applaud those efforts as far as they go. We think those regulations should be further tightened. Among other things, we recommend that enforcement be turned over to the Department of Sanitation, who are already writing violations for unclean sidewalks, and could do daily inspections of news racks as well. And if news racks must be permanent fixtures on our sidewalks, we also agree with colleague groups that New York City should work towards an attractive, minimal, uniform design, in keeping with its plans for coordinated street furniture such as newsstands and bus shelters.

The proposed legislation would, to our dismay and astonishment, move in the opposite direction. By creating a series of log books and maintenance calls rather than an absolute duty to maintain news racks, this bill would make it much harder to enforce the already light regulation of these troublesome additions to our sidewalks.

Therefore, we strongly urge the Committee and the Council to reject this bill outright, and to move instead to further tighten regulation of news racks.