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The Opinion Pages | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Make Them Pay for Park Views

By MAX FRANKEL DEC. 30, 2015

NEW YORKERS, and particularly Manhattanites, are wringing their hands about the two dozen or so supertall luxury towers sprouting along the southern edge of Central Park. The builders are charging up to \$100 million for apartments that offer helicopter views of lush foliage, jagged skylines, soothing rivers and angelic clouds. They lure the superrich, many with suspect foreign assets, to sky-high mansions. They enrich themselves by exploiting weak zoning rules to pour hideous implants into Manhattan cavities.

Like the braggadocio towers of medieval Florence, these concrete fingers in the sky mar the view for the rest of us for miles around. Maybe new laws and regulations will eventually limit their number and size, but much damage is already done, and the profits they earn are bound to sustain the trend for quite a while. Residents around Prospect Park, in Brooklyn: Beware. Oceanfront Queens: Wanna look like Miami Beach?

Instead of wringing our hands, let's rub our palms and share in the profits. Let the city impose a relatively simple new tax — officially called a user fee — based on the grandeur of each lofty view. The tax could be duly scaled, like rents, for the height of each unit, and discounted, like theater seats, for

undesirable obstructions. Informally, let's call it the "window tax."

Roughly speaking, residents would be charged \$10 to \$15 a month per middle-level window with a clear view of parkland or water, less at lower levels, but maybe \$25 above 1,000 feet, with \$5 extra for doors that open to terrace landings. Windows that offer what realty agents euphemize as "city views" could be charged half-price. According to my back-of-the-envelope calculations, we could reap at least \$1 million a year from each of the giants.

The main targets here are the new cloudscrapers clustered just south of Central Park, whose value is hugely augmented — indeed created — by expensive, expansive public amenities like the park, and whose insertion into the city's grid imposes new tensions on city life and services. Yet in fairness, the window tax also needs to be imposed on the buildings fronting the park on all four sides, some of which have stood for more than a century.

As the ads for these residences on Fifth Avenue and Central Park South, West and North testify daily, their value is immeasurably enhanced by temptingly advertised "pk vus," to a degree that has never been properly incorporated into conventional real estate taxes. (Confession: I live on the Upper West Side and have an obstructed angle view of a few Central Park trees from my roof deck; that should cost me maybe \$1 a month.)

The window tax would be legally enacted as a user fee. In principle, each tenant with a great vista would be paying a royalty for the privilege of consuming the city's boundless beauty, eyeballing and mentally photographing costly municipal endowments, night and day, season by season. And the proceeds of the tax would be spent on sustaining and enhancing the parks, streets and waterways they gaze upon. The new revenue would also free up city money to be spent on affordable housing, education and other essential services. Certainly the city's skilled lawyers can find ways to make sure that the tax does not burden people of modest means.

There is ample precedent for such a tax: City governments nationwide

already allow similar fees in other contexts. For example, through neighborhood improvement districts they can impose levies for storm water management and recreational facilities. A similar structure could be created here — the Central Park Vista District. Creating such a district in Manhattan could be just the beginning of a generous new revenue source.

Properly targeted, a window tax would be so appealing and fair that even the realty-bound Legislature of New York would find it difficult to prohibit the project. And now is the time to act, while Albany reels from the successful prosecution of its legislative leaders.

I should confess that four decades ago, when I was writing editorials for The Times, a group of us briefly suggested a window tax around Central Park to save the neglected, crime-ridden public green; with bankruptcy beckoning, no one noticed, and we let the idea drop.

Now that mid-Manhattan is under vertical assault, a Central Park Vista District, duly defined and refined by experience, could inspire other neighborhoods. In time, Chelsea may like what it learns and form its own Hudson View District. The Miss Liberty Vista District, charging Wall Street's towers, will not be far behind. The Rockaways in Queens may feel safely remote for the time being, but their boardwalks could shine in an Atlantic View District.

New York seems destined to continue growing vertically, and prudent restraints always seem to lag behind. So we need to reckon with the giant costs of growth, and find a way to make its wealthiest beneficiaries pay for their privilege. From where I sit, I see a clear opportunity.

Max Frankel, the executive editor of The Times from 1986 to 1994, lives half a block from Central Park.

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