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City Limits WEEKLY

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## READY FOR THE NEXT STADIUM

Residents up and down the West Side band together to advocate for livability and affordability. > *By Laura Silver*

From 23rd to 96th Street and beyond, the West Side of Manhattan is getting organized, and it's not just about neatening up closets and underwear drawers. Earlier this month, 200 residents of Chelsea, Hell's Kitchen and the Upper West Side gathered at P.S. 51 on West 45th Street to celebrate the launch of the West Side Neighborhood Alliance, an independent, member-run community organization working to "guarantee that the ongoing development of the neighborhood serves community members of all races, incomes and backgrounds," according to the group's draft mission statement.

Buoyed by the defeat of the proposed West Side Stadium last spring, local activists built on the momentum — and sense of community — they had established while advocating for affordable housing within the framework of the stadium project. The group went on to tackle the issue of illegal hotels in residential buildings, attracting 250 people to a town hall meeting last June. They had a strong voice, clout, and neighborhood recognition, but no name.

"People kept asking us who we were," said John Raskin, a founding member of the group who also works as community organizer for Housing Conservation Coordinators (HCC), a nonprofit that's been advocating for decent and affordable housing in the neighborhood since 1971. The typical response was, "we're just a bunch of individuals working with HCC," according to Raskin, who says it got the people involved thinking about starting an organization. A core group spent the summer plotting and wading through minutiae.

"Forty or so neighborhood people came together and sorted through all the boring things you have to do when you start an organization," he said, from setting up procedures to developing a logo.

The launch party — complete with donated wine, coffee and hors d'oeuvres, and a rendition of "God Bless America" on the ukelele — was "a good old-fashioned hootenanny," according to Raskin, who joined the staff of HCC two years ago when the organization received foundation funding for community organizing. It was also a springboard for serious work in the community. The Alliance's three-pronged priority list now includes advocating for a new school building on the site of P.S. 51, where overcrowding has led to classes being held in hallways; teaming up with the Mayor's Office of Midtown Enforcement to stop illegal hotels from operating in residential buildings; and working to help preserve federal Section 8 housing subsidies for five apartment buildings in the area.

In its draft mission statement, the group invites "all West Siders to join the Alliance and help us fight for a diverse, affordable, and livable neighborhood." Raskin says most of the members are long-time residents of moderate means: "Many of the folks most interested in the long-term development of the neighborhood are not the newer, wealthier crowd." [10/30/06]