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**Gale A. Brewer, Borough President**

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## **Testimony of Manhattan Borough President Gale A. Brewer Before the 2018 Charter Revision Commission**

Thank you to Cesar Perales and Members of the 2018 Charter Revision Commission for all of your hard work and for the opportunity to testify today.

While many of the items you are considering are interesting and important, I would like to focus my comments today on Community Boards. This is an area in which I have broad experience, from serving on a Community Board, to working closely with Community Boards in my position at a non-profit housing development organization, as a City Council Member for 12 years, and now as Borough President.

I am in favor of increasing Community Board (“Board” or “CB”) diversity and in ensuring that Boards represent the populations and interests in each CB district. My office has done a great deal to address these issues, and I will talk more about that later in my testimony. But I want to state up front that I oppose term limits for CB members.

CB members have an incredibly important role in the land use process in this city. From understanding what can and cannot be built in their districts, to meeting with non-profit and for-profit developers, to negotiating with developers and ultimately crafting advisory opinions on each and every project that comes before the city, CB members must understand land use and all it entails in New York City. Members must learn about zoning, tax incentives, housing finance, landmarking, and so much more. This is knowledge that takes full time students and planners years to develop, and CB members must learn it all as part-time volunteers. And learning the zoning text and HPD programs is only half the battle. Figuring out how these technical rules and programs apply to particular developments is complicated and time-consuming.

My strong belief is that only when CB members have mastered all of the above, can they meet developers on somewhat of an equal footing. Developers are not term-limited and neither are the expensive lobbyists and land use lawyers they employ – in fact, their prices increase as their experience does. Only when CB members have mastered the complexity of land use can they sufficiently analyze applications, negotiate effectively, and positively plan for their communities. The level of expertise needed increases exponentially when faced with entire neighborhood rezonings, as we have seen in East Harlem and Inwood in my borough, and others in other boroughs. In short, it is more than just institutional memory that we need on Boards – we need people who have developed expertise in land use matters – expertise that it takes years to learn. Without this, Community Boards will remain at a severe disadvantage when considering land use applications, negotiating to make projects better for the neighborhood, and crafting resolutions.

This is not to say that I think everyone should stay on Boards forever. I am proud that during the five years I have been Borough President, we have had a nearly 60 percent turnover in Board members. This is due largely to natural turn-over among members but also sometimes because we scrutinize attendance records, observe all members, and are in constant touch with Board members, staff, and other community activists and stakeholders. This has led us to decline to reappoint board members with bad attendance, those who were unable to fulfill their responsibilities, and those who have displayed poor judgment regarding conflict of interest issues.

An important thing to note is that we have been able to make changes because of an extensive outreach and recruitment process that gives us a bigger and better pool of applicants to choose from. Elements of our outreach and recruitment process could be codified since Community Boards cannot truly represent communities if people do not know they exist. We have made our applications on-line, have done extensive outreach on social media, have distributed flyers everywhere from libraries to schools to Laundromats, and have made presentations both at our own public sessions and in front of various community, civic, labor, and governmental organizations. These steps have enabled us to increase applications for CB membership from about 500 in 2014 to over 700 each year thereafter – and even up to 1047 in 2017. So we have the ability to replace board members who are not adequately doing their job with those who may better represent their communities. In this way, we have made Manhattan boards younger, more diverse, and more reflective of the communities they serve. At the same time we reappointed those who have long-term expertise in land use and zoning, some of whom took the laboring oar in the large community rezonings.

I do endorse a uniform application and some basic procedural standards. For example, each borough president's office should have in-person contact with applicants. But I would caution against taking too much flexibility away from the borough presidents. I have heard that in certain years some borough presidents have had trouble finding sufficient applicants. In Manhattan we are inundated with applications and have combined the approaches of group and individual interviews for applicants.

In addition, to ensure that borough presidents are always striving to increase the diversity and representativeness of their Boards, I would require that: (1) the applications give applicants the option of disclosing demographic information; and (2) that borough presidents be required on an annual basis to publish the demographic makeup of each Board, alongside the demographics of each district.

Finally, a few quick notes on training and resources. They are vital in order for CBs to be effective. My office provides technical assistance to boards on land use issues; and we run a bi-annual training series that covers both basic and advanced land use issues, landmarking, budgeting, resolution writing, parliamentary procedure, conflict of interest, and using data in planning. We are constantly adding new workshops as needs arise. I must also commend and recommend expansion of two successful technical assistance programs. The Fund for the City of New York has for years run an urban planning fellows program, in which recent planning graduates are trained and placed in CB offices for a year. They have proved to be invaluable resources for boards, bringing a level of expertise that is not always readily available at boards.

Whether through this program or other means, Boards should be supported in bringing on urban planners to assist with their land use work.

My office, working with Beta NYC has also developed a tech fellows program, in conjunction with CUNY's public service corp. program and also the Fund for the City of New York and other funders. We train students in the use of open data to help communities, and work closely with CBs to analyze issues, produce maps, and develop applications that enable boards to function more effectively. Resources to help Boards in obtaining and working with the data they need are critical and I think it is important to require DOITT to work with Boards in responding to those data needs which the Boards believe are necessary to properly fulfilling their responsibilities. As Beta NYC recommends, this could be aided by requiring DOITT to respond to the Boards' District Needs Statements insofar as they relate to technology and data.

In addition, I agree that CBs need additional resources. The additional funding Boards received this year is a great start. They are expected to do a lot, with a little. CBs provide extensive constituent services, and are involved in the most basic issues in their districts – from speed bumps to tree pits to liquor licenses. And while doing that, they set budget priorities, and of course grapple with land use and planning issues. They need additional staff. And they must have the resources to comply with the important and necessary mandates with which they are now faced: livestreaming, hearing loops, and other accessibility accommodations, and translation services.

Carefully crafted changes to the mandate and administration of Community Boards would be helpful in improving them. But my office has shown that a hands-on, thorough and innovative approach by the borough presidents can substantially improve the membership and performance of Boards without one-size-fits-all legislative requirements that may actually reduce Board expertise and overall ability.

Thank you again for this opportunity to testify.