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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

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**Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Borough President
Testimony before the NYC Council Committee on Environmental Protection
On Intro 1966-2020 on Wastewater Testing for SARS-CoV-2 RNA**

My name is Gale A. Brewer and I am the Manhattan Borough President. I thank Chair Constantinides of the Environmental Protection Committee for the opportunity to testify on Intro 1966-2020, which would create a pilot program to use wastewater testing as a strategy to detect the potential spread of COVID-19 in New York City communities.

As of October 22, New York City reported 256,046 cases of the COVID-19 and over 23,949 related deaths. Manhattan had 35,149 cases and 3,192 deaths. As the city continues through the phases of reopening, it is increasingly important to implement this testing strategy to stay vigilant and on the lookout for future surges.

We know that testing sewage for SARS-CoV-2 RNA is an effective tool to detect the spread of COVID-19 in advance of a flare-up identified solely by testing. Since March, several European countries including the Netherlands have employed this method to track the spread of COVID-19 cases and to determine where to target testing and tracing efforts.¹

The science made me an early advocate to employ wastewater testing in New York City. On May 18, 2020 with recommendations from the Manhattan Solid Waste Advisory Board, I called on Governor Cuomo and Mayor de Blasio to incorporate sewage testing as a strategy to fight COVID-19.² I also made sure I did my research. My office reached out to Professor Kevin Bisceglia, Associate Professor of Chemistry at Hofstra University, who said that "wastewater-based epidemiology has great potential for tracking the prevalence of SARS-CoV-2 in New York City communities unobtrusively, and in near-real time."

¹ Gertjan Medema, Leo Heijnen, Goffe Elsinga, Ronald Italiaander, Anke Brouwer. *Presence of SARS-Coronavirus-2 in sewage.* <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.03.29.20045880v1>

² <https://www.manhattanbp.nyc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/2020-05-18-Letter-to-Governor-and-Mayor-on-Testing-for-Coronavirus-in-Sewage.pdf>

I applaud DEP's Deputy Commissioner Pam Elardo and her team for implementing wastewater testing for SARS-CoV-2 RNA in all 14 wastewater treatment facilities in New York City starting in the spring.³ In mid-August, DEP developed a final, validated method to measure the viral RNA of all New York City sewage. The agency continues to work in collaboration with DOHMH, H+H, academic partners, hospitals, laboratories, and other essential partners on data analysis. As of October 2020, DEP has a team of three scientists based out of Newtown Creek's Microbiological Laboratory testing 35 samples per week. When the team procures all the needed equipment, testing capacity is expected to increase significantly.

While DEP's current testing may have grown beyond the scope of a pilot as prescribed by Intro 1966, I believe there is value in supporting wastewater testing efforts through legislation.

If the Council mandates wastewater testing for COVID-19, then DEP must be sufficiently resourced. I knew as early as June 18, when Deputy Commissioner Elardo and I were on the same panel discussing wastewater testing for the coronavirus, that DEP was ready to move full-speed ahead as soon as OMB approved the release of funds for the salaries of three scientists and \$230,000 for equipment purchases—an amount justified by the savings in healthcare costs through early detection and targeted contact tracing. While OMB eventually allowed the hiring to proceed, DEP is still working on procuring equipment. This months-long delay has reduced the City's capacity to better manage responses to the pandemic.

Intro 1966 requires collaboration between DEP and DOHMH to report on and determine the feasibility of expanding the proposed pilot. DEP is in regular communication with the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and NYC Health and Hospitals, so that the data collected through wastewater testing is integrated into these agencies' own data streams for more comprehensive detection of COVID-19 community spread. Once detected, working across agencies is vital to coordinating testing and tracing strategies in targeted communities.

Finally, as previously the City Council's Chair of the Committee on Technology and the author of the law that created the NYC Open Data Portal, I must stress the importance of ongoing data collection, analysis, and sharing. I strongly urge the Council to specify in Intro 1966 that data collected through wastewater testing must be made available publicly on the NYC Open Data Portal.

I look forward to working with you and with DEP to further support wastewater testing for SARS-CoV-2 in New York City.

³ <https://www.manhattanbp.nyc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Letter-to-MBP-about-BWT-COVID-Response-PE.pdf>