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OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT  
BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN

**BOROUGH PRESIDENT GALE A. BREWER TESTIMONY TO THE NEW  
YORK CITY COUNCIL'S GOVERNMENTAL OPERATIONS COMMITTEE ON  
BEST PRACTICES FOR  
COMMUNITY BOARD RECRUITMENT & APPOINTMENT  
MARCH 3, 2014**

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Thank you, Chair Kallos and Committee Members, for the opportunity to testify today on the new and innovative changes my office is instituting with respect to the Community Board Appointment Process. I am joined today by Deputy Borough President Aldrin Bonilla who is leading the effort to build on work with Community Boards started by Borough President Scott Stringer.

In the first two months as Borough President I have worked closely with Community Boards, especially at our monthly Borough Board and Borough Service Cabinet meetings, to assess needs and concerns dealing with key questions of data accessibility, timeliness, presentation and usability. It is important not to underestimate the significant level of technology and training that Community Boards require to realize such functions as web-casting, mapping, real-time tracking, and constituent case management.

Nonetheless, the implementation of these supports, tools and resources will have a substantial positive impact on land use, zoning and the licensing recommendations Community Boards must make. For example, when reviewing land use applications, having meaningful city data on school usage, transportation, and other metrics will allow Community Boards to better assess the true impact of proposals, rather than simply relying on the developer for this information.



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As we usher in an era of Open Data to inform and improve government operations and services, it is important to value Open Data not merely for its own sake, but rather, as a process to achieve greater transparency, accountability, performance and participation in decision making. There is much work to be done to make Open Data meaningful and relevant to the stakeholders most in need- which includes all of us here today. We are talking about much more than just publicly releasing city agency datasets and wishing for positive outcomes.

The New York City Charter grants me the power to appoint Community Board Members in my borough. It also mandates my office to provide them with “training and technical assistance.” It is critical and vital that Community Board members have the information, knowledge, and tools that they need to make well-informed decisions for their community and I am committed to providing these tools to all members. We also have to be sensitive to what are some of the skill sets the current board might be lacking, such as social media, website development and mapping and should look toward the new applicant pool to help fill that skills gap as well.

My work on data and technology has informed the Community Board appointment process my office began this year. I am happy to share some of the innovations we are instituting to streamline and improve the recruitment, screening and appointment process.

By February 1<sup>st</sup>, my office received 596 Community Board applications for the upcoming 2014-2016 term. 268 of these applications are from current board members and 328 are new applicants.



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For the first time, the Manhattan Delegation, Community Board Chairs and District Managers were provided with the application data in spreadsheets, as well as, a Demographic Profile of all new applicants. In the spirit of Open Data, I wanted to share the New Applicant Profile for several important reasons:

- 1) it serves as a baseline of applicant characteristics
- 2) it indicates where recruitment, inclusion and participation efforts must be expanded next year
- 3) it provides some insight into which perspectives, sectors and interests are present or lacking in community agenda setting and dialogue and
- 4) it highlights the top concerns that motivate an applicant to seek community board participation as a place to make a difference.

For instance, the data indicated that among new applicants 4% reported public housing as their residence type; 6% were between 18-24 years old; 25% have lived in NYC less than 10 years while 26% have lived here more than 41 years; 28% report that they live and work in the CB district; less than 3% report being a person with a disability. And, my personal favorite: 24% of all new applications were for Community Board 7- talk about a model of civic engagement and service.

This data can inform and improve our efforts to help Community Boards fulfill their mission by appointing diverse, committed, skilled and representative members from throughout the borough. If new applicant demographic data is any indication, we have some work to do to increase participation among key demographic groups whose representation on Community Boards does not reflect their prevalence in their communities.



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Once a baseline has been established, my office will be able to target our outreach efforts to address specific instances of under-representation (such as NYCHA residents, young people, persons with disabilities, and so forth.). I am attaching these data charts to my testimony for submission to the committee.

Diversifying our applicant pool is only part the equation. In re-evaluating the Community Board appointment process that my office inherited, we have been guided by one central question: What are the attributes of an ideal board member? This led us to zero in on three qualities that we feel all good Community Board Members embody: attendance, service, and performance.

These are the criteria that my office is using to evaluate the re-appointment applications of current board members. Every re-applicant will be evaluated by his/her attendance, service to the board, and performance on the board, and this information will be provided to the Council Members. Using meaningful, standardized measurements to inform our-decision making in the appointment of Community Board members helps make the procedure more efficient and bolsters the integrity of the process.

Perhaps our biggest departure from previous practice is my decision to invite all applicants to participate in the interview process, which itself is enhanced to include role plays and simulations. Before, all re-applicants were automatically granted interviews. New applicants were only granted interviews if their application was recommended after initial screening by an independent panel of community leaders.



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Now, all applicants will be granted interviews, conducted by a combination of staff and independent community leaders. While it is more labor-intensive to interview almost 600 applicants, I feel that it is beneficial to observe applicants in group simulations and role plays. The enhanced interviews will consist of group activities, role-playing exercises, and simulations to aid us in observing and identifying the less tangible skills that are critically important to a Member's success on a Community Board. The following are good indicators of a person's suitability for Community Board membership: collaboration, interpersonal skills, respect for the opinions of others, collegiality, a keen mind for analysis, thoughtfulness in decision making, potential for leadership, and problem solving skills.

Consultation and communication are also key aspects of the appointment process and toward that end we have provided Council Members, Community Board Chairs and District Managers with email and print copies of a Memo from the Department of City Planning (11/8/13) regarding the proportion of each CB's population represented by each council member; a map showing the overlay of Community Board and Council District boundaries; a list of Borough President and Council Member appointees scheduled to expire in 2014 and 2015 (list subsequently was updated based on Community Board feedback); a table for each Community Board of members due to expire in 2014 with a corresponding column listing the number of appointments for each Council Member; and a MBPO 2014 Community Board Appointment Process & Timeline Document.

However, even with all of this good information, the reality is that because I have only 300 appointments to make half of the applicants will undoubtedly be disappointed. Simply sending these applicants a non-appointment letter is a missed opportunity.



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To remedy this, my office will propose to the candidate alternative ways to contribute their time, skills, and talent to the borough, such as through appointments to the Solid Waste Advisory Board, Business Improvement Districts, Community Education Councils (CEC), or Community Board public membership. Keeping these non-appointed applicants civically engaged would also help this office address another challenge we frequently face and that is finding people to fill midterm vacancies to Community Boards, seats which can sometimes remain vacant for months at a time. By maintaining an engaged pool of individuals, we can create a civic pipeline through which we can fill these vacancies (a training ground for future Community Board members).

Finally, I would encourage this committee to consider my and Chair Kallos' legislation that asks the State to allow 16 and 17 year olds to serve as full voting members of Community Boards (sponsored by Senator Lanza and Assemblymember Rozic). I have worked with hundreds of interns over the years and have seen first-hand the meaningful role that young people can play in shaping policy and enhancing our neighborhoods. Allowing young people to become Community Board members would benefit the Boards by adding a youth perspective, diverse skills sets and by increasing the breadth of community representation. It would also promote civic participation among our youth. Studies have shown that early engagement leads to lifelong patterns of voting and continued civic participation.

In sum, data has the potential to not just transform the way that our Community Boards make local planning decisions, but also the way that Borough Presidents and Council Members appoint Board Members.

Thank you for your focus on Community Boards and their need for more support so that they can plan for our neighborhoods.