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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

**Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Borough President
Testimony to the NYC Housing Authority
On the FY16 Annual Plan and NextGeneration NYCHA Plan
August 11, 2015**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Gale Brewer and I am the Manhattan Borough President. I represent the borough's 102 NYCHA developments totaling 53,570 units of public housing. According to NYCHA's resident data as of January 2014, more than 116,000 Manhattanites live in a NYCHA apartment.

The hundreds of thousands of NYCHA residents are enough to make up their own city within New York City. There are more people living in NYCHA than in Boston, and Manhattan's NYCHA residents equal the population of Berkeley, CA.

Providing property management and other services to such a massive network of buildings and residents is challenging even in the best of times, so I want to thank Chair Shola Olatoye and the NYCHA staff for the day-to-day work that you do. I understand that NYCHA has had to deal with a \$2.5 billion cumulative projected operating deficit and faces over \$17 billion of unmet capital funding needs due to federal cut-backs over the past decade. These are daunting challenges to overcome, and I want to acknowledge Chair Olatoye's leadership in exploring ways to raise capital as NYCHA's housing stock continues to age and accelerates its need for repair.

I am also here to acknowledge the many challenges that NYCHA residents are facing such as dilapidated conditions, broken facilities, diminished public safety due to rampant drug and gang activity, lack of clear communication from management, and concerns over what will happen to them with all the recent talks about NextGeneration and privatization. The best way to learn about resident concerns and how to address them is to hear it directly from those who live in NYCHA developments.

Last month, on July 8 and July 14, I held two NYCHA town hall meetings to bring together NYCHA staff and over 250 Manhattan NYCHA residents to discuss some of the issues that concern the borough's NYCHA residents the most. At these meetings, I made sure everybody had the opportunity to be part of the conversation by submitting questions and comments to NYCHA staff. Here's a sampling of what they had to say:

- What is being done with all the work orders that are not being completed?
- Why were senior centers closed with no input from the residents or resident association boards? Why were Resident Associations not asked if they could run their own centers?
- Where is the Hurricane Sandy money? The \$73 million that NYCHA no longer has to pay to NYPD? The \$30 million of PILOT payment waived by Mayor de Blasio this year?

- How effective will 311 be over the current centralized system? What is the plan?
- I don't feel safe where I live. Is NYCHA doing anything about the drugs and violence?
- Is NYCHA going to demolish buildings?
- Who will NYCHA be leasing ground to?
- When outsourcing construction, how will NYCHA ensure work is being done correctly?
- What efforts are underway to build housing for seniors and the disabled?
- What is NYCHA's plan for ensuring that more security and cameras are funded and placed in areas of highest need?
- Will the transfer of properties to private-public partnership weaken the rights of tenants?
- What efforts are being made to increase the presence of social workers at NYCHA to deal with the many issues and challenges facing residents?

The residents' questions underscore the importance of open communication. It is important for NYCHA to engage tenant leaders to plan for services that meet residents' needs. Without that, even the best plan will not resolve the ongoing frustration residents constantly feel about not being able to get through to anyone at NYCHA.

Draft FY2016 Annual Plan and NextGeneration NYCHA Plan

My office regularly attends CCOP and Resident Association meetings to better understand NYCHA residents' main concerns. I also work closely with housing experts such as Victor Bach of CSSNY on public housing policy and constituent issues. I am a cosigner of the joint-comment on the Draft FY2016 Annual Plan submitted by the NYC Alliance to Preserve Public Housing, and I urge Chair Olatoye and NYCHA leadership to adopt the Alliance's recommendations as you work to finalize the Annual Plan.

Specifically for the Annual Plan and NextGeneration initiatives, I have the following comments:

Mixed-Income Development on Underutilized Lands

NYCHA plans to create 10,000 affordable units on underutilized NYCHA-owned property, including "a limited number of mixed-income developments... with 50 percent of new housing dedicated to low-income families..." Though NYCHA has not yet specified where these limited number of developments would be located, the expectation is that they will be sited in neighborhoods with strong rental markets in order to bring in higher rental revenues from market rate units.

As the Manhattan Borough President, I am concerned that this means NYCHA developments in Manhattan will see an influx of market-rate units that may create additional challenges to current tenants. Assuming that NYCHA residents will be able to apply for—and afford—the affordable units, how will families that used to be neighbors reconcile one household's sudden ability to live in a new building with presumably better amenities that cater to the market rate tenants, while the other household remains in an old unit with moldy walls and rat infestations? And on a policy level, how can NYCHA justify using public land for anything other than low-income housing? I urge NYCHA to seriously consider the implication of allowing mixed-income development as "infill" housing. For the fairness of all sites planned for infill

development across the city, NYCHA should move away from the 50-50 model and pursue 100% affordable units built on underutilized NYCHA properties.

Additionally, identification and finalizing of infill sites must be done with resident engagement throughout the entire process—this means having CCOP members, Resident Association leaders, and NYCHA residents of affected developments *at the table from the very beginning*. I am concerned that NYCHA may identify some sites as underutilized when in fact they are used as gardens, playgrounds, or other forms of community gathering space for residents. Without participation from residents who know how each square inch of their development is used, I fear that thriving open space may be sacrificed in the name of housing—and that’s doubly unacceptable when some of the housing in question may be market rate.

Parking Lot Fee Increases

Similar to the challenges that a stronger market poses for Manhattan infill developments, raising parking fees to the maximum level of \$150 a month “for parking spaces in the highest demand areas” will disproportionately impact Manhattan NYCHA tenants. This is a 500% increase for the current rate of about \$30 a month. For many families, owning a car is a necessity rather than a luxury. It is their means of getting to work. If NYCHA is raising parking fees, then high-value areas should not have to shoulder a larger portion of the increases.

Employment Opportunities and Section 3

Many NYCHA tenants have informed my office that while workforce development opportunities are available through Section 3, NYCHA’s Resident Employment Program, and REES (Resident Economic Empowerment and Sustainability), the training that these programs provide are often too late for them to become sufficiently trained for the construction projects already taking place in their neighborhoods.

Under NextGeneration NYCHA, we know that there will be development. The anticipated development activities will bring in construction jobs as well as permanent employment opportunities. To ensure NYCHA residents can take advantage of these opportunities, NYCHA needs to partner with local workforce development organizations *now* to offer training programs and apprenticeships to those who hope to gain entry into the construction and building service fields. Otherwise, by the time developers are selected and construction begins, it will once again be too late.

Housing Priority for the Homeless

I commend NYCHA for housing 1,000 homeless families last year (2014), placing 865 families in public housing and providing 280 families with Section 8 vouchers. With over 60,000 homeless individuals in New York City, including more than 23,000 children, it is imperative for NYCHA to continue allocating housing priority to this most vulnerable population. I will call for NYCHA to assign 750 homeless families with working members in the household into permanent housing, but any such transition needs to be accompanied with appropriate support. NYCHA also needs to restore housing priority for people with disabilities and for domestic violence victims.

Recycling and Sustainability Initiatives

I am happy to see that NYCHA is committed to have all of its developments in compliance with the city's recycling law by 2016. This is a good first step. Yet from my experience, NYCHA must not simply clear out a storage area, provide recycling bins, and then check off the development as being in compliance. There must be ongoing outreach to increase the recycling participation rate among residents. There must also be *practical* ways to work with NYCHA's unique waste disposal challenges, such as providing smaller garbage bags that actually fit into the garbage chute and then letting residents know what should and shouldn't go into regular trash. There also must be adequate training for all NYCHA management staff so that items properly disposed as recyclables will be put out on the proper days for Sanitation pickup.

I urge NYCHA to work with groups that are already committed to bringing recycling—and I hope one day, food scrap separation—into public housing. There is the Manhattan Solid Waste Advisory Board (SWAB), which my office oversees, with experts who worked with the Grant Houses TA to make it the first NYCHA development to have recycling many years ago. In June, interns from my office partnered with 5th graders from PS 34 on the Lower East Side—many of whom are NYCHA residents—and with Cafeteria Culture to raise recycling awareness among residents of Campos II. There are many possibilities to promote recycling among NYCHA developments, and my hope is that NYCHA will make the effort to do it right.

Use of Technology to Improve Communication

One of the biggest concerns that NYCHA residents shared during the two July town halls was the slowness, inconsistency, and sometimes the complete lack of proper follow up of repair requests. While insufficient capital money is a major factor, the repairs that NYCHA does have the resources to perform should not be disorganized and peppered with miscommunication and underperformance.

I am a strong proponent of using technology to make it easier to manage complex systems such as NYCHA's database of service requests. I also firmly believe that data should be accessible, at the least, to the person who made the service request. Open Data technology is already available and should be something that NYCHA can look into adopting. Furthermore, NYCHA's repair staff can be equipped with mobile devices that are connected to a centralized database so that every repair visit and work performed can be documented *with residents' sign-off*. This way, residents who take time off from work to wait for a repair staff's arrival will no longer have to argue his or her case if the person never shows up, and repair staff who cannot connect with a resident for an appointment will be able to document the visit.

Meaningful and Effective Resident Engagement

I want to re-emphasize the importance of resident engagement *in a way that works for CCOP and Resident Association leaders*. I understand that NYCHA has begun to more proactively engage with its residents, but I am still hearing from resident leaders that they are not invited to participate meaningfully in the actual planning of any project, and that "resident engagement" often means being called to a meeting in which NYCHA staff gives a presentation of what it already plans to do. NYCHA should send out meeting notices earlier so that residents interested in participating can have sufficient time to make adjustments to their schedules.

Lastly, I want to stress that I and my staff are available to provide support to NYCHA residents. We are planning several Know Your Rights events this fall with the emphasis to train tenants to be able to be effective organizers and resident leaders in their developments. Every year, my office also offers a series of leadership training courses (please see list of workshops on next page) to Community Board members, SWAB members, and Community Education Council members. For the next leadership training series, I hope to add NYCHA training to the roster of available classes provided for free for resident leaders.

In summary, I am calling for NYCHA to:

- adopt the NYC Alliance to Preserve Public Housing's recommendations;
- keep housing built on public land affordable and accessible;
- improve residents' quality of life through properly implementing environmental responsible initiatives and using the latest technology; and
- in all projects, meaningfully engage residents in dialogue and incorporate their input.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to continue working with NYCHA.

MBPO Leadership Training Series

List of courses offered in 2015:

- Community Planning Tools
- Conflict of Interest/Freedom of Information Law
- Diversity Training/Equal Employment Opportunity
- Effective Resolution Writing 101
- Land Use & Zoning 101
- Advanced Land Use & Zoning
- Landmarks 101
- NYC Budget Process & District Needs
- Parliamentary Procedure 101
- Unlocking Open Data