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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

**Testimony of Manhattan Borough President Gale A. Brewer on
LPC Backlog Initiative – Manhattan A & B Hearing Items
November 5, 2015 and November 12, 2015**

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony regarding the current backlog items for the Borough of Manhattan that the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) will be considering for designation at the Special Hearings Dedicated to Backlog Items on November 5, 2015 and November 12, 2015.

First, I want to thank Chair Srinivasan and her staff, Sarah Carroll, Mark Silberman, and Lisa Kersavage, for meeting with myself and my staff to engage in a robust discussion on the importance of these items and public discourse on them. The hearings are the result of our discussions, which had been preceded by months of public input, and before that the months of robust debate between my office, landmark advocacy groups, and REBNY to tackle this issue of a backlog. Amazingly we all agreed – no one wanted a backlog! It absolutely made no sense for buildings to sit in limbo for years. However, we also agreed it would be a disservice to the importance of designation and the work by neighborhoods and preservationists to erase decades of work in one single action without any public discussion.

Our Landmarks Law is incredibly important in ensuring the diversity of Manhattan and our city. This law was the first of its kind and served as the model for municipalities across the country. It withstood legal challenges that went all the way up to the Supreme Court, which explicitly told the nation that landmarks matter. Without our City's Landmark Law preserving historic areas of Manhattan from Greenwich Village to Harlem, and beautiful buildings from Grand Central Station to the Cloisters, this county would look more like an impenetrable wall of steel and glass boxes, than the mix of old and new that makes our Borough so special.

Therefore, I also want to thank the Commissioners for listening. This is a herculean undertaking to address decades of work by neighborhoods, advocates, and the LPC. Some of the work you are reviewing may have been undertaken decades ago, or over a period of up to 40 years. Last November, when the issue of how to eliminate the backlog first arose, my staff and I visited every Manhattan building on this list over Thanksgiving weekend. Based solely on the exterior, we believe that some of these are real landmarks, neighborhood gems that should be saved and are worthy of designation on architectural merit and significance alone. Some of these buildings, like the IRT Powerhouse, I pushed for as a Council member just a few years ago. Others, like the Loews Theater on 175th Street, have been neighborhood priorities for years. I am so grateful that these and the other buildings under consideration are getting their due consideration.

So when I say I am thankful to be able to deliver testimony on these items, and for others to have the chance to do so as well, I really mean it. Public discourse is essential to ensure transparency and robust discussions, since designation serves a real public benefit, but often times can be seen as a private burden. In addition, public discourse is critical for the consideration of designation since not everything is an obvious aesthetic gem. The Landmarks Law allows significant latitude for the LPC to designate an item “because it has a special character or special historical or aesthetic interest or value as part of the development, heritage, or cultural characteristics of the city, state, or nation.” The LPC took an important first step in recognizing a part of our heritage and progress with the designation of the Stonewall Inn earlier this year, but we have so much more work to do. And a number of items on this backlog represent such an opportunity. We should not be scared to landmark items symbolizing such values because we do not have a roadmap forward for alterations to these buildings. Instead let us also take this opportunity to think creatively and create some predictability for potential changes to a building whose significance is not reliant upon its architecture.

These two public hearings on the Manhattan items will offer you and the public an opportunity to hear which buildings are considered of special significance by both neighborhood preservationists and our City-wide preservation groups. I would therefore ask that you pay particular attention to their testimony as these organizations dedicate their existence to this endeavor. Additionally, these hearings will provide a forum for demonstrating when buildings have significant community support. Designation is not always popular, so when a building, site or historic district engenders strong support from the Community Board, that should be taken into consideration by the LPC as a positive factor. For the record I want to highlight those buildings or sites that meet this important consideration:

Manhattan A Group

- Excelsior Power Company Buildings, 33-43 Gold Street
- 143 Chambers Street
- 315 Broadway
- 57 Sullivan Street
- James McCreery & Co., 801-807 Broadway
- 2 Oliver Street
- 138 Second Avenue
- Mission of the Immaculate Virgin, 448 West 56th Street
- Interborough Rapid Transit Powerhouse, 850 12th Avenue
- Hotel Renaissance, 4 West 43rd Street
- Union Square Park
- Bergdorf Goodman, 754 5th Avenue
- Sire Building, 211 West 58th Street

Manhattan B Group

- President Chester A. Arthur House, 123 Lexington Avenue
- Edgar J. Kaufman Interiors, 809 United Nations Plaza
- 150 East 38th Street House
- St. Michael's Episcopal, 227 West 99th Street

- 412 East 85th Street
- St. Joseph's Church, 401-403 W 125th Street
- St. Paul's Church and School, 121 East 117th Street
- St. Paul's Rectory, 113 E 117th Street
- Loew's 175th Street Theater, 4140 Broadway

Public discourse also matters when a building owner does not want landmark designation. Our Landmarks Law does not require owner permission, but it is clear from reading the research files that the lack of permission has been a barrier for designation for a number of these sites. I know I disagree with a number of people on this when it comes to houses of worship, but I do not think current ownership should matter. We need to think more long-term, and if a neighborhood church is the best example of an architectural style in that neighborhood and is a significant place identifier it absolutely should be landmarked. Current ownership should not matter in deciding whether or not to preserve an historic resource – because that is what our historic buildings and districts are – a valuable and irreplaceable resource. Therefore, I would like to reiterate my support for designation for the following items -- items which I found so obviously meritorious and which finding of merit the research files themselves so clearly support: Excelsior Power Company Building, IRT Powerhouse, Bergdorf Goodman, St. Michael's Episcopal Church Complex, St. Paul's Church and Rectory, St. Joseph's Church, and Loew's 175th Street Theater.

Thank you so much for this opportunity to testify and for your commitment to working with local communities to have a broad range of voices involved on this important undertaking.