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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

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Testimony for Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers
November 22, 2017**

Thank you to Co-Chairs Darren Walker and Tom Finkelpearl, and to the members of the Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers for allowing me the brief opportunity to speak today. My name is Shulamit Warren Puder, Director of Policy and Special Projects for Manhattan Borough President Gale A. Brewer.

Like many cities, states and countries, New York City is discussing how to address monuments and statues with challenging histories and associations in our midst. This conversation is needed and will ultimately bring a greater understanding to how we highlight the role of monuments in public spaces and how we engage with them.

The conversation on the presence and impact of monuments has been ongoing for some time, but we saw a spike in dialogue following the disturbing gathering of white supremacist and Nazi-affiliated organizations opposing the removal of Charlottesville's Robert E. Lee statue. This is not the only statue with such a troubling legacy, and there are few cities that can avoid confronting these issues. Here in New York City in East Harlem, a coalition of community members, my office and other neighborhood stakeholders have been debating the presence of the Marion J. Sims statue, and have participated in community-led meetings advocating its removal.

How should New York City approach its own reckoning with history? Perhaps we should begin by examining other countries for models of how to present history.

Indian cities have taken different approaches with British Raj period statues: Coronation Park in Delhi, India took all of its colonial statues and put them in one park. The public land

where these reminders of a painful past now sit has “not erased its imperial origins,” but rather it “collected painful symbols of it and then allowed their potency to dissolve.”¹ I suggest this Commission seek out and research examples from other countries, as these may broaden our own perspectives on what our choices might be, moving forward.

Another idea would be for all statues to include a plaque, perhaps with an accompanying app or website maintained with City sponsorship, providing fuller information about the person or persons depicted in them and their historical context – the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Our city does need more statues and monuments that celebrate the contributions of its diverse communities. Our heritage as a city built by waves of immigrants, forming a tapestry of vibrant cultures, is one of our greatest strengths. As you may know, Borough President Brewer was deeply involved in working with the Dept. of Parks and Recreation and other stakeholders to realize the Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony Woman Suffrage Movement Monument. Slated for a 2020 unveiling on the centennial of the ratification of the 19th Amendment, the monument will stand on The Mall in Central Park, and its place on Literary Walk was dedicated in a ceremony earlier this month. The monument will be the first figurative piece depicting real women in Central Park, and it will be the park’s first new commemorative sculpture installation since 1965. Our statues and monuments must include more women and more people of color, and we should look to public-private partnerships to expand statues and monuments beyond our City’s parks to include placements in pedestrian plazas and city-regulated privately -owned public spaces (POPS).

¹ Coll, Steve. “Things To Think About When Taking Down Statues.” *The New Yorker*, August 31, 2017.