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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

2019 State of the Borough remarks (as prepared) Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Borough President

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Good afternoon and thank you for joining us. Special thanks to NYU for hosting today and to Manhattan Neighborhood Network for airing our event. As always, we have an exciting panel that will discuss our urban agenda – the issues that are defining our city and how we govern.

Let me begin by mentioning one or two of the many people who over the past year inspired us and keep our borough special. For those of you who don't already know Diana Blackwell, take a moment to meet her. She seems to be at every meeting, conference, and celebration. In December, she actually sprinted 3 blocks to climb aboard the Borough President's float for the spectacular Harlem Lights holiday parade on 125 Street. When she's not on the run, you'll find Diana Blackwell taking care of the most fabulous gardens in all of NYCHA.

Shula Warren Puder, the Director of Policy, has a brother who is a Navy Chaplain. When she told me that his ship would be docking in New York, and the sailors and Marines aboard wanted to do a service project, Diana swung into action. She went to Home Depot, got an enormous donation of materials, and decided that she would have this volunteer crew replace existing garden beds which were beginning to fall apart because of old age. With that support, Diana is one step closer to having a completely accessible garden for everyone to use. Unbelievable.

Then she came to us with a problem that many gardeners wish they had: the gardens she oversees at Frederick Samuels Houses produce *too much* food! So brilliant Shula found an organization that does canning. In fact the Cuir (PRONOUNCED QUEER) Kitchen Brigade does so much canning that they sent hundreds of pounds of pickles to Puerto Rico after hurricane Maria. So,

without getting too deep into the great pickle project, next week Diana is bringing 36 NYCHA gardeners – young and old – to the Kitchen Brigade’s canning workshop so they can preserve and enjoy their own garden produce well into the winter. This is the stuff that makes our Manhattan a place to live, and love.

The Civic Innovation Fellows are CUNY students who spend a year in my office, working with the extraordinary BetaNYC – a civic hacking organization. These students are a mosaic of our city. In my office, they learn about open data, Community Boards, and New York City issues. They bring all of this together, and then head out to provide information and training to community boards and the general public.

This year they analyzed the demographics of Manhattan’s community districts and mapped it to community board membership. With this tool we can recruit new board members strategically, ensuring that our boards reflect the communities they serve. Our Civic Fellows also work on BoardStat – a new tool developed by BetaNYC to map 311 data: what were the top complaints, where and when, and were they resolved. For example, we’re all affected by construction noise. The data reveals that it’s a big problem on several blocks after 9pm. Now we can find out if the contractors have a permit to work after hours; if not, we can stop them.

Innovation Fellows – please stand so everyone can see you. These students will be upstairs at our reception following our panel, and will be doing demonstrations of BoardStat and other digital tools that help us work better, and even sleep better. While you’re meeting the Innovation Fellows, be sure to check out SLAM (the State Liquor Authority Mapper) – a tool for checking if bars and clubs have valid liquor licenses.

From re-zoning of a whole neighborhood to sanitation baskets at your corner we’re on the job seven days a week working to keep Manhattan affordable, safe, accessible, healthy, green, and vibrant. We have pushed the envelope on numerous issues; fought some big fights and some small ones, and have won some. Our accomplishments of the past year are highlighted in this publication (**HOLD UP**). Everyone should have received it when you came in.

My long-time friend Kathy Goldman, who is here today, has always said that to get people’s attention you have to talk about either food or sex. I’ve been advised to start with food.

Naturally it's a top priority for us: sourcing green leafy vegetables and fruit from local farmers, sponsoring summer meals for [young people](#), advocating for healthy eating, and lots more. After our conference and report on urban gardening, we invested capital funds on hydroponics and vertical farming in schools and senior centers. This year we're funding "enhanced cafeterias" in high schools designed to encourage students to choose healthy meals.

We're very proud of our food bag program for seniors— this will be the 6th year. We have great partners like Council Speaker Corey Johnson, CM Helen Rosenthal, and GrowNYC – the Greenmarket folks— in northern Manhattan, the West, East, and Lower West sides, and Roosevelt Island. Seniors can purchase \$8 bags of farm-fresh produce, pick it up at their local senior center, or have it delivered to their building. These bags contain recipes and storage tips for the healthy items inside, and can be purchased on a week to week basis – no need to lay out lots of money up front. Over 5,500 bags were purchased this past season! In our year-end surveys seniors rave about this program, and we are looking to expand again this year.

We also sponsor legislation— yes, Borough Presidents can do that— and we have introduced more than 60 bills in the City Council. 20 have become law. As part of our initiatives on healthy eating and living we want to know what young people are being taught in school about nutrition. Are they learning what foods are healthy and what are not? How about the connection between food and health? Do schools teach this in health or science class? Are they partnering with non-profits for special classes or workshops? I am a big believer in data, so recently we partnered with Education Committee Chair Mark Treyger to introduce a bill requiring schools to report on the nutrition education their students receive. Armed with this feedback, we will be able to help design improved nutrition education for all of our students, and get them started sooner on healthy lives.

We've been really busy on a great many other fronts. We've created many task forces and working groups, including one to address where and how to house detainees relocated from Rikers Island; another is working to maintain community health services after Mount Sinai Health Systems announced plans to [downsize](#) Beth Israel Hospital; a third— (a huge priority of mine)— is focused on the Manhattan Garment Center, bringing all parties to the table, including the EDC, to preserve core garment businesses in place and in perpetuity. Then there is the ongoing saga of the L train. We worked hand in hand with the MTA, transit advocates, and affected communities, investing hundreds of hours to make sure we were really ready for the closure. When years of

planning went out the window at the 11th hour, it hurt. We're still pushing for assurances on rider safety and to keep planned improvements to traffic congestion in the 14th Street corridor.

And in way of an update, we opened the first-ever MBP's storefront office on 125th Street. We knew there was an unmet need for community outreach, and sure enough thousands of constituents have come in for assistance. They are ably served by Director Athena Moore, Rosalba Rodriguez, and their staff of 5.

Speaking of constituent work, I believe in it, but so did Jimmy McManus, who recently died and was the last of the Tammany Hall leaders in Hell's Kitchen. We were different but we shared a belief in supporting the needs of the community. Sam Roberts wrote McManus' obit in the New York Times. He gave an example of constituent service: An old man came to the political club. What is your profession? Answer: Pickpocket, but I can't work now because my eyes are going. But I never robbed a working guy in my life. Jimmy McManus got the guy an apartment. (I would have done the same!) At the funeral, Jimmy's nephew told the following story. A woman called the club and said her beloved dog had died. She asked Jimmy what she should do. He said bring it to the ASPCA. She said OK, she put it in a suitcase, and went out the door to the street to travel to the ASPCA. This was the crack era, and someone saw her with a suitcase, and stole it!

Then there are the hundreds of events our staff and interns do each year – from NYCHA family days, art exhibitions at our [Maggi Peyton art](#) gallery, neighborhood celebrations, workshops for community empowerment, and of course testimony at Council and agency hearings. Of course, a little bit goes on behind the scenes as well.

I want to focus briefly on some of the legal work in which we have become involved because I think it is so important – for community planning and for fighting for the unique neighborhoods that make Manhattan great.

Two Bridges is a low and moderate income residential neighborhood on the Lower East Side. It sits near the East River among public housing developments. The area was formerly classified as an Urban Renewal Area. When developers proposed building four enormous towers, contained in three developments, that would loom over and overwhelm the area, the Department of City Planning decided that the required changes to the existing plan for the neighborhood were only (quote) “minor modifications” to the residential development plan approved decades ago, and

therefore needed no community land use review. In this case the projects that the developers wanted to build would increase the tallest building in the neighborhood from 27 stories to over 80 stories.

Without getting too far into the weeds (as many of you know I am wont to do), developers who seek special permission to build must submit their projects to ULURP – the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure. This multi-layered process involves community board review, borough president review, and ultimately a City Council vote.

Without ULURP, which is imperfect but vastly better than no process, we all would just have to watch as ever-larger towers go up around us, with no ability to ask questions, review, or participate in the process of determining what gets built. So along with the City Council, my office is in court seeking to ensure that approval of the Two Bridges towers is open to full review.

I want to be clear – ULURP does not prevent things from getting built. I mean, have you looked at the Midtown or West Side skylines lately? ULURP ensures that there is public review of what gets built when zoning changes are required. This is why my office is also looking so closely at potential abuses of “Infill” housing on vacant land in existing communities. At issue now is a push to build private, market-rate towers on tree-filled open space in NYCHA developments, supposedly to raise money for repairs. I am not necessarily against this strategy. But as with all drastic changes to land use policy, the wishes of the public must be heard and served. Everyone wants to improve the lives of NYCHA residents. But is it really a good idea to destroy the “green lung” around the housing developments just to raise money? In public policy, this is where the “rubber meets the road.” So stay tuned.

Thanks to the elected officials, community boards, and advocates the Department of City Planning is addressing the “Super-talls.” There is a proposal to address the mechanical voids, which make up fake floors, and enable developers to sell condos on even higher floors. We are being proactive and also looking at floors with pools, bowling alleys and 30-foot climbing walls that contribute to the height of the building; and I am also concerned that these buildings are anti-urban...we want New Yorkers to congregate in the public sphere. That mingling is what makes Manhattan great.

I've been in elected office a long time and in public service even longer. I know a lot! What enables me to make good decisions, to advocate for my constituents effectively, and to govern well is listening to people of all points of view. And don't mean at scripted public forums. When we stop listening at the community level, we stop being good leaders, and the city suffers.

New York faced big challenges when I started working for the John Lindsay Administration in the Parks Dept. But today's unparalleled prosperity has imposed new hardships. Trying to protect our neighborhoods and landmarks, save our storefronts, create truly affordable housing, keep folks in their homes, make sure they have a decent place to live, and allow communities a real voice when changes come—these tasks make the State of the Borough today challenging.

There is no end to the work to be done. I pledge to advocate, legislate, and do whatever it takes to serve the people of Manhattan as I always have, every day all year around. Like I said, that includes listening and learning. So I'm pleased now to introduce our phenomenal panel of smart and dedicated New Yorkers, and hear what they have to say about the State of the City, urban policy, what we really need to do about the subways, affordable housing, NYCHA, finding tech companies that are maybe tough enough for New York, and all the rest. Thank you.

And I hope you'll be listening and participating right along with me. You can live tweet using #SOTB2019 or #UrbanPolicyNow and tweets will be shown on our twitter wall on the stage. The wifi and password information is on the program.

And please join us after the program for a reception in the Rosenthal Pavilion on the 10th Floor.