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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

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Testimony before the New York City Council Committee on Transportation on legislation to expand pedestrian space on 75 miles of city streets to enhance social distancing by Manhattan Borough President Gale A. Brewer

Good afternoon. My name is Gale Brewer and I am the Manhattan Borough President. I am testifying in favor of legislation introduced by Speaker Johnson and Councilmember Rivera to temporarily expand space for pedestrians and cyclists to allow for safe social distancing during the coronavirus epidemic.

I recently sent a letter with Councilmembers Johnson, Rivera, Chin, and Powers to Mayor de Blasio requesting that the City re-initiate its temporary pedestrian expansions, with a focus first on Broadway between Times Square and Chinatown. The letter had the support of many of the Business Improvement Districts along the Broadway corridor and has since picked up additional support from Manhattan Community Boards 4 and 5 and the Financial District Neighborhood Association.

My letter and the Council's proposed legislation recognize the unfortunate fact that our streets are poorly designed to properly respond to this crisis. In many cases, particularly in Lower Manhattan, the sidewalks are narrow and make social distancing difficult. People may not return to work and entertainment venues if their experience involves enduring the pedestrian-heavy crowding synonymous with Midtown.

It is imperative that we create more space for pedestrians and cyclists. With traffic down dramatically, this can be achieved by strategically closing some streets to motor vehicles.

Boston, Denver, Oakland, Minneapolis, and San Francisco have all announced ambitious plans to open streets to provide more space for social distancing. There are 135 cities around the world that have responded to this crisis by opening streets to pedestrians and cyclists. From this global perspective, the Council's proposed legislation is a mainstream idea.

In order to implement this idea, we should coordinate and cooperate with community boards, neighborhood organizations and BIDs or local Chambers of Commerce to plan, execute, and maintain street spaces for the public. Every effort must be made to garner this base of support to minimize demands on NYPD or DOT at a time when their resources are severely limited.

As a co-chair of the East Midtown Rezoning Task Force and now a member of the East Midtown Public Realm Improvement Fund Governing Group (East Midtown Governing Group), I have seen how BIDs representing businesses that need loading and delivery space work successfully with a community that needs open space when streets are closed or shared. On a broader level, lots of considerations could go into the selection of the streets, such as density and household income, access to food sources, connections to parks, emergency routes to hospitals. This data-driven analysis could help to prioritize the need for open space and the selection of streets.

These proposed, innovative approaches to street use will not only help to limit community spread during the Covid-19 pandemic, but also provide a template for future uses of city streets. I support the Council's proposed legislation. It serves an immediate need and begins a conversation about the recovery and future needs.