

NEW YORK CITY CHARTER REVISION COMMISSION
BRONX HEARING
April 12, 2010

Good evening Commissioners and welcome to Bronx County. This statement is being offered on behalf of the twelve Community Boards representing Bronx County.

As the Commission goes about its work, it is important to remember the valuable role that the Community Boards play in the lives of the City. The Boards serve over 1.4 million people residing in the 64 neighborhoods of the Bronx. According to the New York City Charter, Chapters 68 and 70, the Community Boards have an important advisory role in dealing with land use and zoning matters, the City budget, municipal service delivery and many other matters relating to their communities' welfare. We are advocates for the community interacting with city service providers, elected officials and the general public for the benefit of the neighborhoods that we serve.

The Board's land use review powers are of primary importance to the future of our Borough, in that development plans are often not in line with the needs of the community. Community Boards must continue to be consulted on placement of **all** municipal facilities in the community and on other land use issues. The Charter requires any application for a change in or variance from the zoning resolution to come before the Boards for review, and the Board's position is considered in the final determination of these applications. Without input from the Boards, ill conceived development projects will begin their inexorable march across our Borough's landscape, altering the streetscapes and the sustainable environment that was in existence for generations. Working with city planning and our elected officials, Community Boards throughout the City have ensured rational development and preserved the character of communities.

Under the Charter, Community Boards comment on ULURP matters and are in a unique position to offer city agencies such as the Department of City Planning, valuable local input concerning a proposal's affect on a neighborhood. Community Boards have been instrumental in working with this agency in increasing the number of parking spaces, establishing height requirements for developers of residential structures, and in initiating community strategic development plans such as the 197A plans adopted in Bronx Boards 3 and 8. These community plans provide for the development, growth, and improvement of the city, its boroughs and communities. Good development, one that recognizes human needs and the value of historic neighborhoods, is enhanced by the input from the Community Boards.

In these times, this City has scarce economic resources and cannot expend them on anything other than quality projects. Therefore, the City must be prudent in its expenditures, especially relating to the Capital and Expense Budgets. The Community Boards engage in a strategic analysis of their Board's needs through the production of the District Needs Statement; the ranking of district budget priorities; public hearings on the Mayor's Preliminary Budget and responses to the Mayor and the Council. Additionally, the Community Boards serve as a repository, a resource of maps, plans and historical documents concerning these expenditures. Through these processes, the Community Boards ensure the propriety of these expenditures.

An essential aspect of any Community Board's operations includes the provision of **personalized case management services** to our constituents, the residents of New York. These services can range from mediating disputes between landlords and tenants, ensuring public safety when approving street activity permits and liquor licenses in conjunction with the NYPD, and also providing information, resources and referrals, paving the way for new programmatic initiatives.

Through the monthly District Service Cabinet meetings with city agencies, the Boards are able to articulate the needs of the communities, facilitating and often coordinating the expedited repair of infrastructure, cleaner streets, increased police and fire services, improved responses to health needs, enhanced senior services, and park improvements. Much of our agenda involves the unresolved issues of the 311 system.

The Boards interact daily with the new 311 system, and are full partners in the resolution of service requests. The 311 system is a centralized data referral system, however, the Boards ability to interact with the system is hampered because there is no dedicated community board phone line. The Boards are local, and are therefore in a unique position to assist the city agencies in dispatching crews to sites and apprising them of conditions on the ground. A mechanism should be established between the Community Boards and 311 that will allow for the transmittal of value driven data, allowing the Boards to pinpoint trends and where needs for services can be identified and allocated.

At these District Service Cabinet meetings, the District Manager is able to forge partnerships between the city agencies to overcome jurisdictional concerns and facilitate improved service deliveries. These meetings also allow the community boards to provide the city agencies with local expertise

and input on strategies, assisting them in the development of rational, community sensitive policies.

The City Charter lists a variety of agencies that must interact with the Community Boards in resolving concerns. There has been an evolution in government, that has created new City agencies that were not in existence when the document was written, such as the Departments of Education, Homeless Services, Information Technology and Telecommunications and the Administration of Children's Services, to name a few. The rise of problems in these areas has fueled the creation of these agencies, and the Charter should be amended to reflect their establishment. The Boards routinely deal with these agencies, and formal placement within the Charter with a description of their role and interaction with the community boards should be formalized.

Since the administration of Mayor Robert Wagner, the Community Board structure has provided exemplary service to the City of New York, with a small staff (3-4 per Board) and volunteers. Boards typically have fifty volunteer members, or, throughout the city - 2950 active volunteer workers whose contributions, if they were compensated, would run into the millions. The Board offices coordinate these volunteers in the most effective and efficient manner, making the boards the most cost effective city agency.

On the subject of Community Board efficiency and structure, attention should be paid to examining the funding of the Community Boards. Perhaps, adopting the funding formula used by the Independent Budget Office should be considered to ensure that community boards can continue to focus their energy on providing for the community.

Additionally, the Community Board structure provides one of the few venues where the residents of our City can interact on a monthly basis with elected officials, public service providers and other decision makers in public meetings. Clearly the Community Board structure is the best bang for the buck in City government. In short, we are the smallest unit of government; we are the first line of contact for your average New Yorkers. We are the frontline workers.

As we look towards the future, community boards should be supported in continuing to be a meaningful part of the municipal government and meeting the needs of our constituencies.

Thank you for your consideration.