



ASIAN AMERICAN LEGAL DEFENSE AND EDUCATION FUND

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STATEMENT OF BETHANY LI
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TO THE
NEW YORK CITY DISTRICTING COMMISSION

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Brooklyn Borough Hall, Brooklyn, New York 11209

My name is Bethany Li and I am a staff attorney at the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF), a national civil rights organization founded in 1974. AALDEF works on a broad range of issues including housing and land use policies. Among other things, AALDEF participates in many coalitions and planning initiatives focused on protecting lower-income communities of color in Sunset Park in Brooklyn and Chinatown/Lower East Side in Manhattan.

After interviewing numerous community groups, AALDEF has submitted recommendations for Asian American communities of interest that should not be divided. I have worked extensively in some of these communities with community organizations, residents, workers, small businesses, and property owners. I have also represented workers, residents, and churches in land use and housing cases in both Sunset Park, Brooklyn and Chinatown/Lower East Side, Manhattan. In addition, I have conducted a survey of the impact of luxury development on the housing needs encountered by residents in many of these communities and am drafting a report of the results. Today, I would like to share some of the preliminary results and the experiences of neighborhood residents and workers in Sunset Park and Bensonhurst in Brooklyn and Chinatown/Lower East Side in Manhattan that illustrate the interconnectedness of various Asian American immigrant communities.

The survey focused on six communities that have among the largest concentration of Asians with the highest poverty levels in New York City.¹ They are Bensonhurst and Sunset Park in Brooklyn; Chinatown/Lower East Side in Manhattan; and Jackson Heights, Elmhurst, and Woodside in Queens. Between 2009 and 2010, we collected a total of 853 surveys in these six neighborhoods.

¹ 2005-2009 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Custom Table, B17001D. Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months in Sex by Age (Asian Alone).

The survey responses and our conversations with neighborhood residents, workers, and small business owners demonstrate the connectedness of certain communities to each other. They share many characteristics such as cultural background, economic status, languages, community services and resources, public transportation, and workplaces.

Brooklyn

Sunset Park: 30% of Asians in Sunset Park live below the poverty level, and 75% are foreign born. 39,952 Chinese people live in the neighborhood,² and 81% of the Chinese-speaking population in this neighborhood is limited English proficient. This area is currently divided between 2 City Council districts (CD38 and CD39). A significant Chinese population of both Cantonese and Mandarin speakers live in Sunset Park, often considered Brooklyn's Chinatown. Sunset Park's Eighth Avenue serves as a main commercial corridor for Chinese people in the neighborhood and many surrounding areas in Brooklyn, including Bensonhurst. Sunset Park has grown in part because rents in Chinatown are increasingly expensive. Many Chinese people live in Sunset Park, but continue to work in Manhattan's Chinatown after being priced out of its rental market. Ironically city rezoning plans and development trends have also pushed more development into Sunset Park, making this neighborhood increasingly less affordable in recent years. Chinese and Latino residents are concerned about finding housing that is affordable for their families. Many Chinese families who may not be able to afford increasing rents in Sunset Park have moved to Bensonhurst, a neighborhood in Brooklyn with a high percentage of low-income Asian families that shares similar characteristics.

Bensonhurst: 17% of Asians in Bensonhurst live below the poverty level, and 69% are foreign born. 47,105 Chinese people live in Bensonhurst, and 70% of the Chinese-speaking population in this neighborhood is limited English proficient. This area is currently divided among 4 City Council districts (CD43, CD44, CD47 and CD50). Bensonhurst has also experienced a growing Chinese population in recent years. Based on our survey, the biggest reason cited for moving to Bensonhurst (31%) is the lower rents in the neighborhood. Because the populations in Sunset Park and Bensonhurst are similar, the concerns faced by residents in both neighborhoods often overlap. Our survey found that similar percentages of people in both neighborhoods have the same amount of difficulty paying bills; rent (17% in Bensonhurst and Sunset Park), healthcare costs (15% in Bensonhurst and Sunset Park), and utilities (13% in Bensonhurst; 16% in Sunset Park) topped the list. Issues with rental housing also overlap as these two Brooklyn neighborhoods had the lowest percentage of people who have leases. Only 26% and 35% in Bensonhurst and Sunset Park respectively have leases as compared to 45% of people overall in all six neighborhoods. In addition, both neighborhoods had higher percentages of people citing lack of heat as a major problem (13% in Bensonhurst; 8% in Sunset Park).

² 2010 Census, Summary File 1.

Although Bensonhurst remains more affordable than Sunset Park, market-rate development has impacted residents in both neighborhoods in similar ways. A similar percentage of people in Bensonhurst and Sunset Park noticed more luxury buildings (15% in Bensonhurst; 14% in Sunset Park). Similar percentages in both neighborhoods also have found every day goods becoming more expensive (22% in Bensonhurst; 29% in Sunset Park) and fewer stores where people can afford to shop (33% in Bensonhurst; 39% in Sunset Park). The same percentage of people in both neighborhoods (6%) noticed that more neighbors are forced to move out, which is the lowest of the six neighborhoods surveyed. However, despite similar populations and everyday needs and concerns, Bensonhurst is clearly the more affordable neighborhood based on median rent and on residents' perceptions. For example, our survey showed that only 13% in Bensonhurst find apartments to be unaffordable versus 25% in Sunset Park.

Although Bensonhurst and Sunset Park have slight differences in housing affordability, the shared characteristics between the Chinese American population in Bensonhurst and Sunset Park are significant. In fact, because of the neighborhoods' different levels of affordability, residents may have even more connections to the other neighborhood as many people have moved from Sunset Park to Bensonhurst. Residents in both neighborhoods share common languages, supermarkets and restaurants, housing concerns, and resources and services. Consequently Bensonhurst is similar to Sunset Park and should be grouped together in the same legislative district.

Manhattan

Chinatown/Lower East Side: Chinatown/Lower East Side is one of the last affordable immigrant neighborhoods in Manhattan. 34 % of Asians in Chinatown/Lower East Side live below the poverty level, and 74% are foreign born. The percentage of Asians in Chinatown/Lower East Side is 40%, and 73% of the Chinese-speaking population in this neighborhood is limited English proficient. The area of Chinatown/Lower East Side is currently in CD1 and CD2. Chinatown/Lower East Side is comprised of a significant Latino and Chinese population – which includes Cantonese, Mandarin, and Fujianese speakers. Many of the newer Chinese Fujianese immigrants live along East Broadway and farther east, stretching out much farther than what some consider the historic core of Chinatown near Mott, Pell, and Doyer Streets.

Chinatown/Lower East Side is one of the few Asian neighborhoods in which a significant amount of public housing exists, which is reflected in the higher percentage of applications to and general knowledge about public housing among Chinatown/Lower East Side residents as compared to people surveyed in the other neighborhoods. Because of this affordable housing stock in addition to the rent regulated units, Chinatown/Lower East Side has been able to hold on to a significant portion of its working class community. Both neighborhoods have a shared

immigrant history, which is reflected in the stores and resources that support the neighborhoods' economy.

Residents, small businesses, and property owners in both neighborhoods have similar concerns about the development that is encroaching in the area. Because of their similar socioeconomic status, tenants in both neighborhoods have identified the common problems of luxury development driving up rents and the lack of new affordable housing. They live in similar overcrowded housing conditions. Because of the significant amount of rent regulated buildings in both neighborhoods, tenants also face similar problems with harassment – with landlords who ignore many major problems like water leaks, rodents, and lack of heat in apartments and who will sometimes bring frivolous lawsuits to try to evict rent-regulated tenants. Much of the new hotel and condominium development that has ravaged the Lower East Side in the past several years is also hitting Chinatown. Both immigrant working class neighborhoods have experienced even more development pressure due to a rezoning in the areas slightly north of this area in 2008 that slated more luxury development for Chinatown and Lower East Side. To keep the neighborhood affordable, coalitions with organizations, residents, and workers from both neighborhoods have been working together to propose policies that would better protect the affordable housing in the neighborhood. Further, a community board-sponsored planning initiative focused on land use, education, immigrant services, economic development, and other issues faced by immigrant families encompasses both Chinatown and Lower East Side. Because Chinatown and Lower East Side face similar problems and have similar populations, people are also experiencing the impact of luxury development in the same ways and therefore are trying to find common solutions that will benefit both neighborhoods. People see the preservation of one neighborhood as tied to the other.

Because of the neighborhoods' shared socioeconomic status, housing stock, and interests, Chinatown should be grouped with the Lower East Side in the same legislative district. The neighborhoods of Tribeca and Soho should not be grouped with Chinatown because the socioeconomic status and interests of those neighborhoods is so vastly different.

Conclusion

AALDEF's neighborhood boundary lines help ensure that Asian American and other racial and ethnic minorities' voting rights will be protected under the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965. The shared characteristics and concerns of the various Asian American communities of interest that we have identified are important considerations in determining neighborhood boundaries. To ensure that racial minorities have a full and fair opportunity to elect candidates of their choice pursuant to the Voting Rights Act, the Commission should adhere to the submitted neighborhood boundary lines.