

**TESTIMONY OF BRIAN PAUL,
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BEFORE THE NYC DISTRICTING COMMISSION
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My name is Brian Paul and I'm the Research and Policy Coordinator at Common Cause/NY, a nonpartisan citizens' lobby and a leading force in the battle for honest and accountable government. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on City Council redistricting.

Before discussing issues specific to Manhattan and the draft plan, we would like to take this opportunity to applaud the Districting Commission's efforts to engage the public by setting up an interactive online mapping tool. The web version of the Maptitude software empowers regular citizens and small organizations to fully engage in the redistricting process by removing the financial and technological barriers. We encourage all New Yorkers to take advantage of this tool and make their voices heard.

Now to move on to discussion of the draft plan. The Districting Commission has repeatedly described the draft plan released on September 4th as a "baseline...which merely adjusts the council lines for population so that they remain within the narrow band permitted by law." According to Chairman Romano's comments at the September 4th meeting, the mapping staff was "instructed wherever possible to respect the natural boundaries created by our five boroughs, bodies of water, and so forth" and to follow the other criteria listed in the City Charter.

For most of the City it appears that these instructions were followed, producing an accurate "least change" map that adjusts the populations while following the Voting Rights Act and Charter criteria. However, one area that seems to deviate from this "least change" methodology is District 8 in East Harlem and the Bronx.

There is no question that District 8 must move further into the Bronx in this redistricting cycle. This is due to a chain reaction caused by the Census' observed population decline of over 20,000 in Washington Heights. Since the City Charter prohibits two districts from crossing the same two boroughs, District 10 cannot extend into the Bronx to pick up the additional

population and must instead pick up additional population within Manhattan, causing a chain reaction of changes to District 7, 8, and 9.

But there is no reason that District 8 must move as far into the Bronx as the Commission's draft plan draws it. As drawn in this draft, District 8 would not only drop its section of the Upper West Side but also lose portions of East Harlem along Park and Madison Avenues, as well as all of Randalls Island. This draft District 8 would have a majority Bronx population, with 84,872 residents in the Bronx (50.5%) and 83,086 residents in Manhattan (49.5%).

The extent to which District 8 is pushed into the Bronx in this draft appears to be a result of the packing of many Manhattan districts all the way to the legal limit at nearly +5.0%. The ten Manhattan districts in this draft have an average deviation of +4.1%, while the eight Bronx districts have an average deviation of +0.7%. There appears to be no rational explanation for this imbalance.

While these proposed changes to District 8 in East Harlem might look minor on paper, these blocks are home to important cultural and economic institutions like the La Marqueta community marketplace, as you've heard local residents testify. By any definition, they are part of the East Harlem community of interest. If one is attempting to draw a "least change" map that keeps "intact neighborhoods and communities with established ties of common interest and association, whether historical, racial, economic, ethnic, religious or other," as the City Charter clearly states, these blocks would not be removed from the East Harlem district.

It is also very puzzling that a "least change" map would remove Randalls Island from District 8. The Charter is very clear that districts should not cross borough borders unless absolutely necessary and the Commission staff were specifically instructed to respect natural boundaries. Yet Randalls Island, part of Manhattan, is for some reason moved to the Astoria Queens-based District 22 in this plan. In addition to this violation of the City Charter, Randalls Island also has closer association with the community of East Harlem than with Astoria, as part of the same Community Board and current council district.

In response to these proposed radical changes to District 8, Common Cause/NY was approached by Community Voices Heard to examine how restoring the current district boundaries in East Harlem and Randalls Island would affect this draft plan. We found that this can be accomplished with only minor changes to the draft plan.

To pick up the extra population in Manhattan, District 8 has to lose population in the Bronx, which must be redistributed throughout the other districts. This can be done while restoring neighboring districts closer to the way they look under the current plan – District 15 shifts south, District 17 picks up the Yankee Stadium area and no major changes are needed to any

other districts. Populations then have to be rebalanced in Manhattan but this can be done with very minimal changes, with nothing that adversely impacts the Voting Rights Act.

Making these changes would actually restore balance to the distribution of districts in Manhattan and the Bronx – the average deviation for the ten Manhattan districts would be +2.5% and the average deviation of the eight Bronx districts would be +2.9%.

In the attached plan, District 8 would have a total population of 159,829 with 102,709 (64.3%) in Manhattan and 57,120 (35.7%) in the Bronx. This plan demonstrates that there is no demographic or legal reason preventing District 8 from maintaining its current boundaries in East Harlem and Randalls Island. To be clear, we are not proposing a “Common Cause Plan” here. We produced this plan in response to requests by local community organizations to demonstrate how East Harlem could be kept whole in the context of this draft.

We also encourage the Commission to take a close look at the recommendations of the UNITY Plan produced by a coalition of civil rights groups in a collaborative process. The UNITY Plan represents an admirable collaborative balance between different perspectives and offers another alternative for addressing these issues.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today.

Manhattan City Council Redistricting East Harlem District 8 Restored



