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Democratic District Leader, 69th AD Part C

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To The New York City Districting Commission:

I am the Democratic District Leader from the 69th AD, Part C, essentially covering West 106th-West 125th Streets, Parks to River: Morningside Heights and parts of Manhattan Valley, the Upper West Side and southern and West Harlem. I have been District Leader since 1979; this is my fourth City Council redistricting.

I would like to commend the Districting Commission for the excellent job it has done; this has been a fair and open process where people's voices are heard. Ten years ago, when initial drafts of the City Council lines split the linked complexes of Grant Houses and Morningside Gardens into two different districts, representatives of both complexes came down to the hearing and expressed their concerns. When the final lines were drawn Grant and the Gardens were back together again.

I certainly hope you will keep Grant and Morningside Gardens together for ten more years, but I'm here today to speak on behalf of a much larger constituency, the entire area from West 96th to West 125th Streets, with Central and Morningside Parks (and Morningside Avenue 123rd to 125th) as its eastern boundary and the Hudson River as its western boundary. This compact, cohesive, racially diverse area should be in one City Council District. It is currently in three districts, 7, 8 and 9, with all but the part in the 7th being connected across vast swaths of parkland in such a way as to insure that the residents west of the park do not receive the effective community-based representation that they deserve. This is not meant to disparage the current incumbents of Districts 8 and 9, both of whom I admire and supported for re-election in 2009. It is simply a recognition of the reality that no Council Member can effectively serve such far flung districts, and inevitably it's the most remote, inaccessible and "tacked on" parts of the district, in this case the Upper West side from 96th to 125th Streets, that is left unserved.

City Council Districts are service-oriented districts. Residents of these districts need easy physical access to the office of their Council Member, something that is unrealistic to expect for the much larger Congressional Districts. In Manhattan above 14th Street, service districts run north-south: police, sanitation, Community Planning Board. This is especially true of 59th-110th Streets, where there is a very large and famous park that separates the West Side from the East Side, with Morningside Park continuing the separation until 123rd Street. From 59-96th Street, no City Council District "jumps the park" from East Side to West, but in the smaller area from 96th-125th, Council Districts jump the parks twice, in the 8th District and the 9th District.

What is the effect of these mappings for people who live in the Upper West Side from 96th-125th Streets? For those who live in the current 9th District, they live in the catchment area of Community Boards 7 or 9, but they are joined into a Council District centered on Community Board 10. They live in either the 24th or the 26th police precincts, but they are part of a Council District centered on precincts 28 and 32. For those West Siders who live in District 8, they are (except for one block) in Community Board 7 and police precinct 24, but are part of a district overwhelmingly centered on Community Board 11 and police precincts 23 and 25.

Now we come to the transportation. The subway lines run north-south. People who live on the West Side 96th – 125th have to go east-west to visit the offices of their Council Members. There are no streets, let alone bus routes, which run between 96th and 125th, except for 110th, where there is a bus that runs to 5th Avenue, but no further east into East Harlem, which is the focal point of the 8th District. This means that it is almost impossible for people who live in the most economically disadvantaged part of the Upper West Side, Manhattan Valley (100th – 110th, Amsterdam-Central Park West), to readily get to their 8th District Council Member's office on East 116th Street. A very pressing problem in Manhattan Valley is housing. Landlord-tenant disputes usually involve mountains of paper and other documentation. Meetings between tenants and their representatives must therefore be in person. This is extremely difficult given where Manhattan Valley is in relation to the locus of the 8th District. The result is that the local Assembly Member, Daniel O'Donnell, who has an Upper West-Side based district and an office within a few hundred yards of Manhattan Valley, does most of the Valley's constituent work. With more geographically sensible City Council Districts this would not be the case, and many more needy constituents would be helped.

I know that the current 8th and 9th Districts exist largely because of imaginings of what the Voter Rights Act requires. We can all speculate on this, but I'm sure that it doesn't mean that placing poor minority residents into remote, inaccessible districts somehow "strengthens" minority voting rights, especially when there is a better way.

What is the "better way"? To keep West 96th – 125th together in one City Council District. If the rest of the district ran north you would also be creating a district with a significant chance of electing a Latino Council Member. But if you absolutely can't do this then divide the area between no more than two "West-based" districts, the 7th to the north, which would also join the Columbia campuses into one Council District, and the 6th to the south, which would give people in Manhattan Valley and the rest of the Upper West Side much better access to the municipal services that they need.

Thank you for your consideration.