



Testimony of Steven Choi, MinKwon Center for Community Action, to the City of New York 2012-2013 Redistricting Commission

October 10th, 2012

New York City 2012-2013 Redistricting Commission, 2nd Round Public Hearing
LaGuardia Community College (Little Theater)
31-10 Thomson Ave
Long Island City, NY 11101

Good afternoon. My name is Steven Choi, and I am the Executive Director of the MinKwon Center for Community Action. I'm here to comment on the proposed City Council districts that this Commission has offered.

The MinKwon Center was established in 1984 to meet the needs of the Korean American community. Since our founding, we have made a profound presence in the Korean American, Asian American, and local communities through grassroots organizing, education, and advocacy initiatives that address important community issues.

1. The MinKwon Center's Efforts on Redistricting

As a proud member of ACCORD, the Asian American Community Coalition On Redistricting and Democracy, the MinKwon Center has been active because we believe that fair and equitable redistricting is absolutely critical to increasing the civic engagement of our communities. Our communities' voters have historically been disempowered and disenfranchised by complicated procedures, the lack of translated materials, and by intimidation and harassment. The MinKwon Center has sought to overcome these obstacles by registering new voters, educating them about the process, mobilizing them to vote, and then protecting them at the polls.

I want to emphasize that the goal of our efforts is completely non-partisan – we do not support or endorse any politicians or parties, nor is our goal to elect an Asian American or Korean American candidate. Instead, our goal is to empower our communities. And if districts are drawn properly – in ways that respect natural communities of interest and that uphold the Voting Rights Act – then we are rewarded with competitive elections where community members are heard, politicians who are accountable to their communities, and disenfranchised minorities who are now protected. This is critical for the Asian American community, which has grown by more than 30% since 2000 and is by far the fastest-growing major racial group in New York. 19 City Councilmembers have districts where Asian Americans make up more than 15% of their constituents, yet many of these City Councilmembers are unaware of their needs and concerns.

1. Specific Comments on Proposed State Senate and Assembly Districts

ACCORD has worked with Latino, Black, Asian American and other community advocates to create the Unity Maps, which we believe truly represent communities of interest. These Unity Maps were submitted to this Commission shortly after the 1st round of hearings in August.

But I join my ACCORD colleagues in expressing disbelief and anger, because the Unity Maps were simply ignored when this Commission drew their own proposed districts. We at the MinKwon Center agree that the growing South Asian communities in Richmond Hill and South Ozone Park are unacceptably divided, that Chinese and Southeast Asian communities in Chinatown and especially Sunset Park and Bensonhurst are not being kept whole.

And for the Northeast Queens communities in which we are based, our neighborhoods are unacceptably divided. The Oakland Gardens neighborhood, for example, was not included in District 19 with the rest of Bayside and instead was put in District 23, although it is clear that the residents believe themselves to be living in Bayside. The neighborhood of Elmhurst is even more divided. Elmhurst is home to a heavily immigrant community with a surging number of Asian American recent immigrants. This area shares a great deal in common with the rest of District 25 and Jackson Heights, but instead has been placed with very different communities in the 29th District. As ACCORD notes, this area - bounded by the BQE on the west, the Long Island Expressway on the south, Junction Blvd on the East and Roosevelt Ave on the North - should be kept whole as part of the 25th District.

I close by again referring to the Unity Maps, which we believe truly reflect our principles of equality and fairness. The MinKwon Center will continue to organize and mobilize so that Korean American, Asian American, and marginalized communities are heard. We are committed to making sure that the redistricting process helps strengthen democracy, not undermine it.