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**ALEXANDER RIAS**  
Director of BLAC Affairs

Distinguished members of the New York City Districting commission: my name is Alex Rias, and I present this testimony on behalf of the Black, Latino & Asian Caucus (BLA Caucus) of the New York City Council, as its Director, and on behalf of the Caucus' two Co-Chairs Councilman Robert Jackson and Councilman Fernando Cabrera. This testimony is also presented on behalf of the twenty-six of fifty-one City Council districts it represents in all five boroughs. Our constituencies alone represent over 4 million residents of this City. As a citywide Caucus, we are and have been vocal in all aspects of our civic duty—on budget and legislation, as well as advocacy on issues of social justice and equality. Our ability to serve our individual and collective constituencies hinges upon this very process of redistricting every ten years.

### Staff Diversity

First, the BLA Caucus is pleased that the Commission appointments have resulted in putting together a diverse group tasked with this difficult undertaking. To ensure that the needs of all communities are best served and respected, diversity must be prevalent at every step and stage of this process; even beyond the members of this Commission. The racial and gender diversity of the Commission at all staff levels is also paramount. The Caucus understands that as this process rolls on, and some of the more arduous aspects of the process ramp up, further staff will be added. And we look forward to applauding this Commission on making a concerted effort to ensure that all levels of this Commission reflect the diversity of this great city.

### Common Communities

#### Voting Rights

Next, while the Voting Rights Act protects African Americans, Latino Americans and Asian Americans as racial groups, challenges to the act by the Supreme Court refute racial predominance, and argues that the districting process must protect communities of significant cultural, economic, political and social interests. In resolving the lack of clarity in these conflicting premises, the Commission must be transparent in its interpretation of these legal mandates.

After all, “life and death is by the power of the tongue.” The power of community voices lay in their ability to rally around commonality; to spur on change; to vote. No one knows the issues of a community like those who live within it. If the voices of particular communities are disjointed in their Council District identities, the power of their vote is fractured as a result.

Dramatic changes in New York City population have occurred in communities of color; particularly in the Asian and Latino communities. Migration throughout the city has been particularly pronounced within Latino communities, and is particularly prevalent throughout Queens, the Bronx and Upper Manhattan, and continues to change the face of the local electorate. A 32% increase has been realized within the Asian community, and despite totaling 13% of New York City's population, no New York Congressional Representative, nor New York State Senator is Asian. Just one Assembly district is

represented by an Asian member, and just two members of the City Council—members of our Caucus—are Asian.

While the Caucus is not advocating for specific lines at this time, it is committed to the protection of common community voices as a priority of this process. The processes of mitigating these dramatic shifts will require special attention and careful detail from the Commission.

#### *End Prison-Based Gerrymandering*

It is also expected that the Commission interpret the laws—upheld in court—that prevent prison-based gerrymandering. It is our understanding that the Commission is currently reviewing prison population data, and it is our hope that these figures are used appropriately. The diluting of votes through gerrymandering has hurt communities. It has starved them of resources and representation that can prevent members of those communities from entering the prison system in the first place. Prison-based gerrymandering has overwhelmingly affected Black and Latino communities, as these populations account for 81% of the New York State prison population. Fully implementing the law can undoubtedly change the course of many young people's lives and change many communities around this City for the better.

#### **Public Access**

Finally, the Caucus thanks the Commission for clearly articulating its districting timeline as well as its public hearing schedule to date. This, of course, is just the tip of the iceberg in this difficult and, at times, tumultuous process. The process requires public access and transparency, and when we reach the point of drawing lines, the public will undoubtedly want more—and they deserve it.

Establishing a clearly articulated, interactive data and mapping system that allows the public to engage and lend a voice to the districting process is critical. With the technological improvements witnessed and adopted over the last decade, the public deserves a system that allows them to observe the evolving landscape, and at the very least a resource room where the public can submit map suggestions. We believe that utilizing these tools will lend its hand to establishing fair and equitable lines.

The BLA Caucus thanks the Commission for accepting this testimony on behalf of its twenty-six members and the communities that we represent. We recognize the weight and difficulty of the task ahead, and intend to fully participate in these proceedings to bring equity and fairness to communities around this city. Thank you.