

TESTIMONY OF QUEENS BOROUGH PRESIDENT HELEN M. MARSHALL BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY DISTRICTING COMMISSION

(AUGUST 21, 2012)

GOOD EVENING, AND WELCOME MR. CHAIRMAN AND ALL OF YOUR COLLEAGUES FROM THE NEW YORK CITY DISTRICTING COMMISSION, TO THE GREAT BOROUGH OF QUEENS. OF COURSE, SEVERAL COMMISSION MEMBERS COME FROM QUEENS, INCLUDING FORMER STATE SENATOR FRANK PADAVAN AND FORMER CITY COUNCILMAN TOM OGNIBENE. IT'S GOOD TO KNOW THAT OUR BOROUGH IS WELL-REPRESENTED IN THE REDISTRICTING PROCESS. AS THE QUEENS BOROUGH PRESIDENT, I AM GRATEFUL FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO ADDRESS THE COMMISSION AS IT EMBARKS ON ITS IMPORTANT MISSION TO DETERMINE THE PROPER CONFIGURATION OF NEW YORK CITY'S CITY COUNCIL DISTRICTS.

AS WE ALL KNOW, FAIRLY DRAWN, REPRESENTATIVE ELECTION DISTRICTS ARE AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT IN ENSURING THAT OUR RIGHT TO VOTE-- ONE OF THIS

GREAT DEMOCRACY'S MOST CHERISHED CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS-- ACTUALLY MEANS SOMETHING. I TRUST THAT THIS COMMISSION WILL GIVE IN-DEPTH AND DETAILED CONSIDERATION TO THE DRAWING OF NEW LEGISLATIVE DISTRICTS FOR THE CITY, WHILE OF COURSE TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THE NEEDS OF OUR RESIDENTS.

I HAVE TO ADMIT THAT, AFTER SEEING THE ORDEAL THAT THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK WENT THROUGH DURING THE STATE LEGISLATIVE REDISTRICTING PROCESS, I AM A LITTLE CONCERNED ABOUT HOW THIS PROCESS WILL TURN OUT. HOWEVER, THE MAYOR AND THE CITY COUNCIL HAVE CONVENEED AN IMPRESSIVE GROUP OF INDIVIDUALS TO SERVE ON THIS COMMISSION. I LOOK FORWARD TO ITS PROPOSALS FOR NEW DISTRICTS. IN COMING UP WITH YOUR PROPOSALS, I ASK THAT YOU KEEP A NUMBER OF FACTORS IN MIND.

AS YOU KNOW, QUEENS HAS THE SECOND-LARGEST AND MOST DIVERSE POPULATION OF ANY COUNTY IN THE STATE, IN TERMS OF NATIONALITIES, ETHNICITIES AND RELIGIONS REPRESENTED. WE HAVE MORE THAN 2.2

MILLION PEOPLE HERE. FOR THE RECORD, HOWEVER, WE BELIEVE THAT THE CENSUS BUREAU UNDERCOUNTED THE POPULATION OF QUEENS BY MORE THAN 100,000 DURING THE 2010 CENSUS.

QUEENS IS A BOROUGH OF SEPARATE NEIGHBORHOODS. OUR PEOPLE LIVE IN DOZENS OF COMMUNITIES. WHEN YOU ASK WHERE WE ARE FROM, WE OF COURSE SAY WE'RE FROM QUEENS; HOWEVER, WE ALSO MAKE SURE TO TELL YOU WHAT COMMUNITIES WE'RE FROM. IN FACT, QUEENS IS THE ONLY BOROUGH WHERE, WHEN WE RECEIVE MAIL, IT IS ADDRESSED TO US IN OUR INDIVIDUAL NEIGHBORHOODS. SO, WHEN WE RECEIVE MAIL, RATHER THAN BEING ADDRESSED SIMPLY TO QUEENS, IT IS ADDRESSED TO LONG ISLAND CITY, GLENDALE, BAYSIDE, LITTLE NECK, FOREST HILLS, JAMAICA, OR ANY ONE OF OUR DOZENS OF OTHER COMMUNITIES. WE PROUDLY IDENTIFY OURSELVES WITH OUR NEIGHBORHOODS AND THEIR RICH CULTURES AND HISTORIES.

IN LIGHT OF THE UNIQUE NATURE OF QUEENS AND ITS COMMUNITIES, IT IS ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT THAT WHEN ANY ENTITY IS CHARGED WITH REDRAWING LEGISLATIVE

DISTRICTS, SPECIAL CARE MUST BE TAKEN. WE NEED TO ENSURE THAT COMMUNITIES REMAIN INTACT AND THAT EVERY VOTE COUNTS.

AS THIS REDISTRICTING PROCESS BEGINS, WE EXPECT THAT ANY PROPOSED NEW LEGISLATIVE DISTRICTS WILL RESPECT THE INTEGRITY OF OUR COMMUNITIES AND PROTECT THE VOTING RIGHTS OF OUR MINORITY POPULATIONS.

I ASK THAT AS YOU UNDERTAKE THIS DELICATE TASK, YOU LEARN FROM— AND THEREFORE AVOID-- SOME OF THE MISTAKES MADE BY THE STATE'S LEGISLATIVE REDISTRICTING TASK FORCE IN ITS INITIAL PROPOSALS. LET ME TAKE JUST A FEW MINUTES TO REMIND YOU. FOR EXAMPLE, IN SOME CASES, THE PROPOSED LINES SEEMED ARBITRARILY DRAWN. IN OTHER CASES, IT LOOKED AS THOUGH SOMEONE WAS TRYING TO SOLVE A JIGSAW PUZZLE BY JAMMING PIECES INTO PLACES WHERE THEY DIDN'T BELONG.

WHILE I'M SURE YOU'RE AWARE OF MANY OF THE CRITICISMS EXPRESSED DURING THE STATE

DEDISTRICTING PROCESS, THEY REFLECTED VALID CONCERNS AND ARE WORTH REPEATING HERE. I REMIND YOU THAT BLACK, LATINO, AND ASIAN-AMERICAN LEADERS AND GROUPS EXPRESSED CONCERNS ABOUT UNDERREPRESENTATION IN MANY PARTS OF THE CITY, INCLUDING OF COURSE IN QUEENS.

THE INITIAL STATE REDISTRICTING PROPOSALS SHOWED A CLEAR LACK OF RESPECT FOR COMMUNITY LINES, AND THEY WOULD HAVE DIVIDED COMMUNITIES BY, AMONG OTHER THINGS, CROSSING NATURAL BOUNDARIES, INCLUDING MAJOR ROADS AND HIGHWAYS. IN FACT, THE NEW DISTRICTS WOULD HAVE DIVIDED COMMUNITIES IN ELMHURST, WOODHAVEN, ASTORIA, AND MANY OTHERS, AND WOULD HAVE JEOPARDIZED THE LEGISLATIVE REPRESENTATION THEY DESERVE.

FOR EXAMPLE, IN WOODHAVEN, SOME OF ITS RESIDENTS WOULD HAVE BEEN IN THE SAME DISTRICT AS ASTORIA—WHICH IS NEARLY ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE BOROUGH. OTHER WOODHAVEN RESIDENTS WOULD HAVE BEEN IN A DISTRICT THAT STRETCHES NEARLY TO GREEN ACRES MALL IN NASSAU COUNTY! UNDER THOSE PLANS, PARTS

OF WOODHAVEN WOULD HAVE BEEN REPRESENTED BY THREE DIFFERENT STATE SENATORS, RATHER THAN ONE SENATOR, FOR WHOM THE COMMUNITY WOULD NO DOUBT BE A BIGGER PRIORITY. THE PROPOSED DISTRICT MAPS EVEN APPEARED TO SHOW—AND I REALLY FOUND THIS HARD TO BELIEVE—THAT A PART OF LEFRAK CITY WOULD HAVE BEEN CARVED OUT AND PUT IN A SEPARATE DISTRICT! ALSO DISTURBING WAS THE PROPOSED MUTILATION OF THE VENERABLE ASTORIA NEIGHBORHOOD. THE NEW LINES WOULD HAVE CUT OFF DISTRICT 12 SEVERAL BLOCKS SOUTH OF THE OLD BOUNDARY AT 20TH AVENUE, AND WOULD HAVE ONE SIDE OF DITMARS IN ONE DISTRICT AND THE OTHER SIDE IN ANOTHER.

I WAS ALARMED, BECAUSE THAT SEEMINGLY ARBITRARY AND ILLOGICAL REDRAWING OF DISTRICT LINES COULD ONLY HAVE LED TO DIMINISHED REPRESENTATION FOR QUEENS COMMUNITIES. REDISTRICTING SHOULD PROTECT OUR NEIGHBORHOODS BY ENSURING COHESIVE REPRESENTATION. THAT IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO GUARANTEE THAT OUR LAWMAKERS WILL RESPOND TO OUR COMMUNITIES' NEEDS. AND IN THIS ERA OF

LIMITED RESOURCES, WITH CRITICAL ISSUES SUCH AS EDUCATION, TRANSPORTATION AND MEDICAL CARE LOOMING LARGER BY THE DAY, WE NEED THE BEST REPRESENTATION WE CAN GET!

OUR RIGHT TO VOTE IS ONE OF OUR MOST BASIC AND CHERISHED RIGHTS, AND ANY ACTIONS THAT COULD IMPACT THAT RIGHT MUST BE TAKEN WITH THE UTMOST CARE. I, THEREFORE, URGE YOU TO IMMERSE YOURSELVES IN A STUDY OF OUR COMMUNITIES, AND TO DESIGN DISTRICT MAPS THAT ARE FAIR, BALANCED, AND TRULY REPRESENTATIVE.

ON BEHALF OF THE PEOPLE OF QUEENS, I INSIST THAT ANY CHANGES IN OUR CITY LEGISLATIVE DISTRICTS MUST ACKNOWLEDGE AND ACCOMMODATE THE DISTINCT, DIVERSE QUALITIES OF ITS DOZENS OF COMMUNITIES.

I THANK YOU AGAIN FOR COMING TO QUEENS TO HEAR OUR RESIDENTS AND TO TAKE HEED OF THEIR CONCERNS. THANK YOU.