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**TESTIMONY TO THE NEW YORK CHARTER REVISION COMMISSION
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July 10, 2010

Thank you Chancellor Goldstein and members of the Charter Revision Commission for the opportunity to participate in this important discussion about government structure. My name is Brad Hoylman and I am the former Chair of Community Board No. 2, which represents Greenwich Village, SoHo, Little Italy, Hudson Square, part of Chinatown and the Gansevoort Market. As such, I am here to discuss community boards, and two problems which I believe could be addressed in the City Charter with the recommendations put forward by Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer. The first problem concerns the inability of community boards to adequately fulfill their Charter-mandated responsibilities to review land use proposals, and the second issue is the vague standards currently in the City Charter on how community board members are to be appointed. Both of these factors have a tremendous impact on the quality of community-based planning as set forth in the Charter.

Currently, there are 59 community boards throughout New York City. Each board consists of up to 50 unsalaried members appointed by the borough presidents, with half nominated by the City Council members who represent that district. They each have budgets of approximately \$200,000 with an average of three staff members, including a District Manager, who serves as the chief operating officer of the board.

In the City Charter, community boards are charged with three basic roles: Improving the delivery of city services to an area, planning and reviewing land use in the community, and making local recommendations on the City's budget. In reality, the community boards' role in overseeing city services has diminished with the creation of the tremendously successful 311 Customer Service Center in 2003, which last month received its 100 millionth call. In addition, elected officials are now performing direct constituent services, taking even more responsibility away from boards in this area.

This leaves the work of community boards focused primarily on planning and land use. The Charter specifically provides that community boards review, analyze and make recommendations on land use applications that must undergo public input and approval through the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP).

We New Yorkers know how important land use is to a community. It not only changes the skyline, but it also has an impact on local economic development and quality of life. The City's

land use process is strongly centralized with the Mayor and the City Planning Commission. This makes the role of community boards of crucial importance in voicing neighborhood needs on land use proposals.

Although community boards are only advisory, they have a significant impact on local land use decisions. Some recent examples include the rezoning of the West 97th - 110th Street area, which Manhattan Community Board 7 ushered through to completion in 2007 after two years of work with City Planning, and my own Community Board's work with the Commission over the last several years to rezone parts of the far West Village - the last portion of which was certified just this week.

This brings us to the first issue I wish to discuss. While community boards are charged by the City Charter with reviewing land use and planning decisions, they generally do not have the in-house expertise to adequately review and analyze land use matters.

To address this problem, the 2010 Charter Revision Commission should recommend that the Charter mandate each community board to appoint its own full-time urban planner and include the necessary budget appropriations to fund this position. We already have seen what this might accomplish. In 2006, Manhattan Borough President Stringer created a Community Planning Fellowship Program, which places graduate students from local urban planning schools in each Manhattan community board office, and this year included two Brooklyn community boards.

The planning students have helped the boards better understand local planning issues and navigate public discussions about development more effectively. Fellows have conducted work ranging from assessing affordable housing conditions to creating tools to evaluate "green" building projects. In my own board, our fellows have conducted an analysis for a potential rezoning of the Hudson Square neighborhood, examined areas for new open space and studied accessibility issues on city sidewalks. This is the kind of planning expertise that I believe the Charter envisions for community boards but does not go far enough in mandating.

The second issue I want to discuss is how community board members are appointed. In order to be eligible for appointment, the City Charter requires that board members have a "residence, business, professional or other significant interest in the district." In addition, the Charter requires that the borough president appoint adequate representation from "different geographic sections and neighborhoods." These are extremely minimal requirements, especially for public officers, and in my opinion do not go far enough to ensure that the most qualified and representative people serve on community boards.

I was part of a team led by Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer that examined the issue of community board membership in 2006. At that time, we found boards were lacking representation of women and minorities, had vacancies of up to 20%, and were rife with undisclosed conflicts of interest.

To address this problem, Borough President Stringer completely reformed the appointment process for community boards. He required a standardized written application and an interview process, the use of an independent screening panel to review candidates comprised of civic and community groups, set timelines for filling vacancies and instituted fixed terms of office, engaged in outreach to community organizations, and began an ongoing training program for board members in areas such as conflicts of interest and the city budget.

I can tell you from personal experience that these reforms have made a dramatic difference in the quality of the representation on our community boards. The diversity of applicants is appreciably higher. Neighborhoods like Chinatown have a bigger voice - which incidentally has directly led to the creation of a Chinatown task force to examine zoning and quality of life issues in that neighborhood. Also, with fixed terms, board members can only be removed for cause, which has ended the practice, in Manhattan, at least, of board members being summarily removed because they have fallen out of political favor.

While it might not be practical to institute all of the Manhattan Borough President's reforms, a good starting point would be to create some uniform standards for the community board appointment process. The Charter should require borough presidents to administer a standard open application process for community board appointments to increase transparency and accountability. Written applications and interviews should be mandated. Borough presidents should be required to conduct public outreach for the application process in non-English languages and issue annual reports on the effectiveness of their outreach efforts in minority communities. Fixed terms of office, no removal without cause and mandatory deadlines for appointments would help ensure that appointments are promptly made and insulated from the whims of local politicians.

As our city continues to grow, community participation in the planning process will become more complex than ever. Creating a merit-based and transparent appointment process for community boards, and providing them with the needed resources to carry out their planning function, will make the planning process more rational and efficient and ensure that community boards are able to fulfill their Charter-mandated planning role.

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today.