



# THE FUTURE OF NEW YORK CITY'S COMMUNITY BOARDS

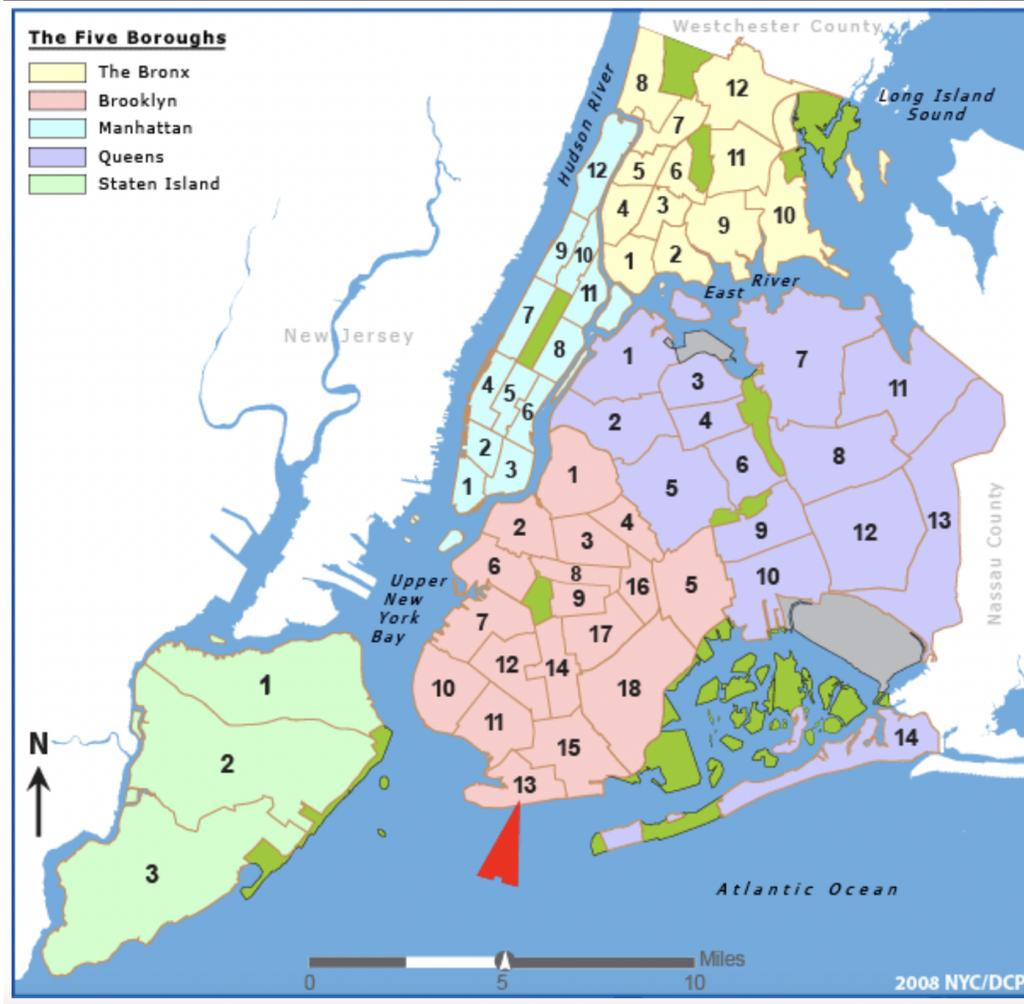
THE FUTURE OF COMMUNITY BOARDS WORKING GROUP FINAL REPORT

DECEMBER 2021



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## INTRODUCTION

New York City's 59 community boards serve a vital function as connectors between residents and City government services. The paid staff and 50+ volunteer members of each board dedicate time and energy to serving their communities every day. Each board currently represents approximately 50,000 to more than 200,000 people<sup>1</sup>, which on the higher end is a population larger than that of Birmingham, Alabama or Akron, Ohio. We inform the public about government programs and proposals, help constituents resolve issues with City agencies, advise on local land use proposals and City budget allocations, liaise with local elected officials, and hold monthly meetings and public hearings so stakeholders' voices can be heard. And those are just the most common responsibilities.

<sup>1</sup> NYC Department of City Planning. "Community District Profiles."

In the past year-and-a-half, the urgency and need for these services has become increasingly apparent. As New Yorkers responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of reliable information, access to resources, and the ability to adapt while maintaining space for civic engagement became more important than ever. Community boards have also increased collaboration with City agencies to ensure food delivery, communication of vital information, and access to healthcare services for our constituents.

Community boards as we know them today were formed in the 1960s in response to calls for more representative local democracy. The need for this representation remains clear, although the boards' functioning, as with many government agencies, has struggled to adapt in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. District managers and staff from community boards in all five boroughs see this time of transition to a new Mayoral administration and many new citywide, boroughwide, and local elected officials as an opportunity to reflect on what is working and what changes and resources we need to effectively carry out our Charter-mandated duties and best serve our constituents.

It is an honor and privilege to serve our communities. We aim to empower the next generation of leaders to give back and improve the quality-of-life in their communities as well. During this process, we sought answers to: What will community boards be like in the future? What do our communities need? How can we better serve them?

In this report you will find our analysis and recommendations. It is important to note that while all boards operate uniquely and adapt to serve their diverse neighborhoods and communities, we've discovered that we share many of the larger challenges affecting us today. Our goals are to raise awareness about the difficulties we face conducting our Charter-mandated responsibilities, begin a conversation with the incoming administration and elected officials about how community boards can be improved today and in the future, and determine how we can best work with our governmental partners.

Sincerely,



Celestina León, District Manager, Brooklyn Community Board 4



Susan Stetzer, District Manager, Manhattan Community Board 3

on behalf of the Future of Community Boards Working Group

## **PARTICIPANTS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

In the Fall of 2019 and early 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the community board district managers who participated in the Brooklyn Borough Service Cabinet meetings began a discussion about the issues and challenges they similarly face. This led to the creation of the Future of Community Boards Working Group, which expanded to include representatives of community board staff from all five boroughs. This group held six meetings between August 2020 and October 2021 and distributed a survey to community board staff to solicit written feedback about a number of topics, including budgets, technology, membership, the boards' relationship with City agencies, and more.

Participants in the Future of Community Boards Working Group represent staff from:

**BRONX COMMUNITY BOARDS 7, 8, 10, 11, 12**

**BROOKLYN COMMUNITY BOARDS 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 14, 17**

**MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARDS 3, 4, 6, 8, 11**

**QUEENS COMMUNITY BOARDS 1, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11**

**STATEN ISLAND COMMUNITY BOARD 2**

Special Thanks to: NYC Office of Management and Budget; NYC Department of City Planning, Planning Coordination and Brooklyn Office; Pratt Institute Graduate Center for Planning & the Environment; NYC Civic Engagement Commission; Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer; City Council Member Fernando Cabrera, Chair, Committee on Governmental Operations; Office of City Council Member Antonio Reynoso; New York City Council Land Use Division; Beta NYC; The Center for Urban Pedagogy; and to our consultant Lacey Tauber for assistance with finalizing this report.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Future of Community Boards Working Group, consisting of district managers and other community board staff from all five boroughs, formed in 2020 with the goal of identifying and seeking solutions for shared issues and challenges. Through a series of meetings and a survey, they identified the following issues:

**RESOURCES:** Community Boards are currently being asked to do more with less. All participants felt they needed more resources to effectively carry out their Charter-mandated duties.

**CONSISTENCY:** Board members and staff have a wide range of skills and expertise related to necessary duties, such as communications and technology, zoning and land use, human resources, development of bylaws, meeting procedures, and fundraising. With little or inconsistent access to trainings and other support, too much responsibility falls on the boards' small staffs, creating inequities across boroughs and from board to board.

**WORKING RELATIONSHIPS:** Boards' relationships with the Mayor and City agencies have varied from administration to administration and currently, there is a feeling among many board staff that their input is not taken seriously and there is lack of transparency. Some City agencies have decreased the types of proposals that require community board review, and/or lessened their participation in the budget consultation process.

**THIS REPORT OUTLINES RECOMMENDATIONS THAT THE WORKING GROUP IDENTIFIED TO ADDRESS THESE ISSUES, ORGANIZED INTO FIVE AREAS:**

**COMMUNITY BOARD BUDGETS AND OPERATIONS:** Community boards have not had a significant baseline budget expansion since 2014. Additionally, district managers receive little support for the day-to-day management of their offices. The community boards need a significant budget increase to maintain their Charter-mandated duties, as well as a "Central Staff" that will assist the boards with a number of important matters, from human resources to onboarding new board members. The boards also need consistent access to technology, functional office space, and expertise in land use and zoning.

**BOARD MEMBER SELECTION, TRAINING, AND CONDUCT:** Beyond the prerequisites that members be at least 16 years old and must live, work, or have a significant interest in the district, there are no other mandated requirements for individual board membership. While many members are deeply engaged in their responsibilities, others are either disconnected from the board's work, or lack the tools they need for success. Borough Presidents should require prospective members to attend board meetings prior to making their appointments,

and the City should provide and require consistent trainings and guidance for members on zoning and land use, meeting procedures, and conflicts of interest.

**THE BUDGET CONSULTATION PROCESS:** The Charter mandates a strong role for community boards in the City's process for developing its annual budget. However, despite the City's efforts to streamline this process using online tools, the fact that agencies no longer require one-on-one consultations with each board and often provide cursory feedback on budget requests has led to growing frustrations with this process. The incoming Mayor should ensure that community boards receive regular data updates and detailed budget information, instruct agencies to offer one-on-one budget consultation meetings with boards (in addition to borough-wide consultations), and provide meaningful feedback on their requests.

**TECHNOLOGY, COMMUNICATIONS, AND OUTREACH:** The Charter mandates boards to disseminate information to the public; to collect the public's complaints, requests, and inquiries; and to track and communicate directly with local community-based organizations. However, communicating with the public is increasingly complex, and the day-to-day responsibilities related to this mandate have presented challenges, especially during the pandemic. The City should ensure that the boards have funding for and access to necessary technologies for digital and non-digital communication, and training and support for using it effectively.

**LAND USE AND ZONING:** Community Boards play a crucial role in the land use process. Yet the rules and procedures surrounding zoning, land use, and housing are notoriously complex, and boards often rely on the expertise of their membership, which varies widely. The City should provide each community board with a staff line and funding for a professionally trained planner, consistent and required trainings for new and continuing board members, and space and support to ensure the public can meaningfully participate.

The Future of Community Boards Working Group sees the transition to a new Mayoral administration and the replacement of all five Borough Presidents and a majority of the City Council in 2022 as an opportunity to strengthen the collaborative relationship between the community boards and all the elected officials and agency staff with whom they interact.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **WHAT IS A COMMUNITY BOARD?**

New York City is divided into 59 geographic community districts, determined roughly based on neighborhood boundaries, and to include nearly equal populations of no more than 250,000 people per district.<sup>2</sup> As shown on the map on page 2, there are 12 boards in the Bronx, 18 in Brooklyn, 12 in Manhattan, 14 in Queens, and 3 in Staten Island. Each has a community board that consists of up to 50 appointed, unpaid board members. Community boards are autonomous City agencies, and their members are City officers.

Prospective board members apply to their Borough President for membership, and the Borough President appoints half of each board's members themselves, and the other half on the recommendation of the local City Councilmember(s) whose district(s) intersect with the community district. Board members must demonstrate that they live, work, or have some other significant interest in the community, and are appointed to staggered, two-year terms. Each board also has a staff led by a district manager, who manages the board's day-to-day operations, as well as other staff whose roles and responsibilities vary from board to board.

The purpose of each board is to encourage and facilitate civic engagement within their communities, and to work with City agencies that deliver municipal services. While the boards are only mandated to hold at least one meeting and public hearing per month, many boards go well beyond this requirement, including having multiple issue-based subcommittees that meet monthly, participating in borough-level meetings with other board representatives, and much more. The community boards play an important role in improving quality-of-life for all New Yorkers and provide a means for constituents to have a voice in planning for their own communities.

The City Charter mandates a number of responsibilities for the boards<sup>3</sup>, including:

#### **CONDUCT OPERATIONS:**

- Elect officers and create and adopt bylaws
- Submit an annual report each year to the Mayor and local elected officials

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<sup>2</sup> New York City Charter, Chapter 69 Section 2701.

<sup>3</sup> New York City Charter, Chapter 70 Section 2800.

#### **LIAISE WITH CITY AGENCIES AND ELECTED OFFICIALS:**

- Consult with and assist City agencies and local elected officials with service delivery and communication of information to constituents. Call upon agency representatives to attend board meetings as needed.
- Assist with setting agency priorities and objectives in the district
- Evaluate service delivery by agencies
- Cooperate with other community boards as needed

#### **EDUCATE AND INVOLVE THE PUBLIC:**

- Hold at least one full board meeting and public hearing per month (except in July and August) on issues impacting the district
- Disseminate information about City services and programs
- Process complaints, requests, and inquiries from the community
- Create and maintain a list of active community-based organizations in the district and their contact information

#### **PARTICIPATE IN THE BUDGET PROCESS:**

- Submit an annual statement of community district needs and recommendations for programs, projects, or activities to meet those needs
- Consult with agencies on the district's capital and expense budget needs and submit budget priorities annually
- Conduct public hearings and make recommendations on how funding allocated to the district should be spent
- Review agencies' plans for capital projects and evaluate the implementation of those projects

#### **TAKE AN ACTIVE ROLE IN PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT:**

- Prepare plans for growth and development of the district
- Attend scoping meetings for environmental review for proposals located in the district
- Hold public hearings on proposals and make recommendations as the first step in the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP).

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### **HISTORY OF NYC COMMUNITY BOARDS**

The framework for today's community boards was shaped over four decades:

**1951:** Manhattan Borough President Robert F. Wagner establishes twelve Community Planning Councils of 15-20 members each, to advise him on planning and budgetary matters.

**1963:** Jane Jacobs, author of *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, recommends local districts to inform City agencies. Mayor Wagner cements this recommendation in the City Charter, establishing the framework for “Community Planning Boards.”

**1968:** Local Law 39 expands the powers of Community Planning Boards and establishes their current structure.

**1975:** A Charter Revision Commission establishes 59 community boards, defines the role of district manager, establishes the District Service Cabinet (consisting of City agency representatives and district managers), and strengthens the boards’ role in budgeting and service delivery. Importantly, this Commission also established the ULURP process, mandating an advisory vote from the community board on land use applications.

**1989:** Another Charter Revision Commission changes the structure of City government and increases the role of community boards in the planning process, allowing them to proactively create plans for their districts through section 197-a.<sup>4</sup>

Many members of the Future of Community Boards Working Group have been involved with their community board through multiple Mayoral administrations, and many noted that recently, communication and consultation between many (but not all) City agencies and the boards has become less frequent and less substantive. Participants expressed an interest in strengthening this relationship as the next administration takes over in 2022.

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**RECENT CHARTER CHANGES IMPACTING COMMUNITY BOARDS**

The de Blasio administration also saw changes impacting community board operations. In 2018 Mayor de Blasio appointed a Charter Revision Commission. While all Charter Revision Commissions may examine and make changes to any piece of the Charter, Mayor de Blasio tasked this Commission specifically with examining the City’s policies regarding campaign finance, voter participation, civic engagement, and the electoral process as part of his DemocracyNYC initiative.<sup>5</sup>

During the public hearing process, Commissioners heard about, “the significant contributions of New Yorkers who volunteer their time, skills, and energy to their local communities... [and that] some community boards do not always live up to their potential to transmit and amplify

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<sup>4</sup> Foran, Seth. “Community Boards,” Gotham Gazette.  
<sup>5</sup> NYC Office of the Mayor. “Mayor de Blasio Announces Charter Revision Commission Appointees.” April 12, 2018.

the voices of all members of the community.”<sup>6</sup> Based on this, the Commission recommended three measures directly impacting community boards, which voters ultimately approved through referenda. The referenda:

**IMPOSED TERM LIMITS ON COMMUNITY BOARD MEMBERSHIP** to four consecutive two-year terms, consistent with the eight years total for City elected officials, effective for appointments or reappointments on or after April 1, 2019. (One cohort of appointees whose terms began on April 1, 2020 are limited to five terms, in order to stagger vacancies.)

**REQUIRED BOROUGH PRESIDENTS TO SEEK OUT “PERSONS OF DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS”** in making appointments to community boards and added new application and reporting requirements related to these appointments.

**CREATED THE NYC CIVIC ENGAGEMENT COMMISSION**, and tasked this body with providing community boards with access to professional planning expertise, translation resources, and training in land use, technology, and meeting procedures, among other responsibilities. It also required the City’s Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DOITT) to provide support to the boards to develop and maintain functional websites to facilitate providing information to the public.<sup>7</sup>

Because these changes are so recent, the full extent of their impact is not yet fully clear, although some measures have already been implemented. While the effects of term limits on board membership are not likely to be felt for a few years, members of the Working Group reported that the new applications and the fact that they are now available online, as well as the updated guidance on appointments, seems to have had a small impact on increasing diversity of board membership (though this varied by borough).

Mayor de Blasio convened the Civic Engagement Commission (CEC) in April of 2019. The Mayor appoints eight of the 15 Commissioners, each Borough President has one appointment, and the City Council Speaker has two appointments. This body is staffed by employees of the Mayor’s office.

The Civic Engagement Commission released its first annual report in October 2021. It notes that the CEC has conducted a needs assessment with district managers and board chairs, secured the use of Language Line translation services for use by community board staff, conducted a series of virtual workshops on board functions, and sourced informational materials on zoning and land use for distribution to the boards.<sup>8</sup> However, Working Group

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<sup>6</sup> Final Report of the New York City Charter Revision Commission. September 6, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Final Report of the New York City Charter Revision Commission. September 6, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> NYC Civic Engagement Commission 2021 Annual Report. October 2021.

members reported a mix of experiences working with the Commission so far. While for the most part, Working Group members appreciated what the Commission has provided, they felt it was clear (and reasonable) that the City's efforts to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the Commission's capacity to implement new programs. Working Group members also reported feeling that the Commission's main focus thus far has not been working with the community boards, rather they have concentrated their efforts on other Charter-mandated duties, such as creating a citywide participatory budgeting process.

## CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. COMMUNITY BOARD BUDGETS AND OPERATIONS

**THE ISSUE:** Community Boards are historically under-resourced. A typical board is currently allocated \$231,100 for staff and \$26,407 per year for OTPS (other than professional services - including office supplies, printing, mailing, and other needs), leaving little room for adding more staff, obtaining technical assistance, or upgrading communications and technology.

Community boards have not had a significant baseline budget expansion since 2014<sup>9</sup>, while staffing needs and responsibilities have grown. Especially in the last year-and-a-half, community boards have been on the frontlines of the COVID-19 crisis. As the first point of contact between the community and the City, they have been called upon to, in addition to their already significant workload, deal with the economic devastation in their communities and the impacts of the pandemic on City services that they oversee. Yet Working Group participants reported having challenges with hiring and retaining professional staff due to budget constraints. Given that the boards already have very small staffs, the inability to hire and retain employees has a much larger impact on their work than it would in a larger agency.

Even while other agencies' budgets increased over time (for example, the Mayor's office budget increased by 71% from 2014-2020<sup>10</sup>), community boards' budgets remain precarious. A lack of baselined funds has meant that even when funding is increased, district managers cannot use the extra funds to hire staff or plan for the long term, because there is no guarantee that these funds will be renewed in the next fiscal year. In fact, in December 2020, the City threatened to cut community boards' budgets by approximately 19%, which would have been

<sup>9</sup> NYC Independent Budget Office. "Fiscal History: Community Boards."

<sup>10</sup> NYC Independent Budget Office. "Fiscal History: Community Boards."

devastating to the boards. However, the City Council intervened to support the community boards by restoring their budgets.

Some boards have addressed this challenge by creating 501c-3 non-profit organizations or informal “Friends of” groups, which give the boards the option to independently fundraise. As Brooklyn Community Board 6 describes why it has such a group: “At current levels of City funding, CB6’s District Office chronically lags in its ability to keep up with the demands of the Board’s work. Proactive planning and long-term thinking are rare privileges for an organization that is mandated to represent and advocate for the varied needs of its neighborhoods.”<sup>11</sup> However, not all boards have the capacity to do this, or constituencies with extra income to donate, creating inequities across boroughs and from board to board.

Also inconsistent are the spaces the City provides for community boards. While the City does cover rent costs, the quality of office spaces varies widely. One district manager reported not having light switches in their office for a decade, while another reported waiting seven years for their bathrooms to be made accessible, as well as frequent flooding in their basement. Another reported being evicted from their space, only to be moved into a non-ADA-accessible basement where the bathroom had no door, where they remained for over a year. Yet another reported identifying a space to upgrade their office, only to have their planned move cancelled by the administration. Some boards are lucky to have their own meeting spaces included with their office, while others must turn to local institutions to provide space for them, creating an additional administrative burden to identify, secure, and coordinate the use of space. This can make the boards’ mandate to hold regular public hearings challenging.

Additionally, human resources support, such as guidance on hiring procedures, vacation time, etc. is generally provided by Borough Presidents, and Working Group members reported that this can be very inconsistent from borough to borough.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**1A. BASELINE AN INCREASE IN COMMUNITY BOARD BUDGETS FOR FY 2023.** The Working Group will gladly take part in discussions about what the exact number should be, however it should be significant enough to cover the needs identified in this report. Ensuring that the increase is baselined is critical for the reasons outlined above.

**1B. PROVIDE CONSISTENT FUNDING FOR ALL COMMUNITY BOARDS FOR TECHNOLOGY UPGRADES,** including software, livestreaming, etc. (See section #4 for more on technology.)

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<sup>11</sup> Friends of Brooklyn Community Board 6 website.

**1C. CREATE AND FUND POSITIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL URBAN PLANNERS** on each board's staff. The planner should be independent and report directly to the District Manager. (See section #5 for more on land use.)

**1D. CREATE A CENTRALIZED OFFICE TASKED SPECIFICALLY WITH WORKING WITH COMMUNITY BOARDS.** The Working Group imagines this being similar to City Council's "Central Staff", wherein community board staff can go to a central resource for assistance with technology, policies and procedures, human resources, legal counsel, training, etc. Working Group participants had varied opinions on where in City government this Central Staff should be housed; while its responsibilities would overlap somewhat with the Charter-mandated duties of the Civic Engagement Commission, this would require significant expansion of the scope, funding, and resources of the CEC, and some had concerns about it being directed by an appointed body that is inherently political and frequently changing. For that reason, many Working Group members felt it should be a separate entity, to ensure that employees of this Central Staff would be solely responsible for working with community boards and that their mandate would be consistent over time. (See section #2 for more on training.)

**1E. PROVIDE CONSISTENT GUIDANCE ON HUMAN RESOURCES.** Staffing policies should not vary from borough to borough. The Central Staff should provide the boards with consistent guidance, including on hiring procedures, vacation and leave policies, retirement, etc.

**1F. CONDUCT A PHYSICAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF COMMUNITY BOARD OFFICES.** The Department of Citywide Administrative Services (DCAS) should work with district managers to identify new spaces for those boards whose offices are not easily accessible to the public and/or do not have public meeting space.

**1G. CREATE A FORMAL, REGULAR CONVENING OF COMMUNITY BOARD STAFF AND A DIGITAL PLATFORM** for information and resource sharing. The Civic Engagement Commission would be a natural partner in this effort.

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**2. BOARD MEMBER SELECTION, TRAINING, AND CONDUCT**

**THE ISSUE:** As referenced above, each community board has up to 50 non-salaried members who live, work, own a business, or have some other significant interest in the community district. Each board member is considered an official of the City of New York. All members are appointed by their respective Borough President, half of them at the recommendation of their local City Council Member(s). They serve in a voluntary capacity for two-year, staggered terms.

Beyond the prerequisites that members be at least 16 years old and must live, work, or have a significant interest in the district, there are no other mandated requirements for individual board membership. (The Charter also mandates that no more than 25% of each board membership can be City employees.) As mentioned above, recent changes to the Charter require the Borough Presidents to report on their efforts to ensure that board members represent the demographics of the communities they represent. Still, Working Group participants reported that, while many members are deeply engaged in their responsibilities, others are either disconnected from the board's work, or lack the tools they need for success. For example, they noted some members have been appointed who are wholly unfamiliar with the work and processes of community boards, indicating that their appointments were likely more political than practical. One district manager asked, "Why would you join something about which you have no direct knowledge?"

Additionally, though Borough Presidents sometimes provide training for incoming members, the quality and thoroughness of content is disparate across boroughs. While the 2018 Charter changes required the Civic Engagement Commission to provide these trainings, as noted above, the CEC's annual report shows they have only provided a handful of optional trainings since they began in 2019. Working Group members reported that while these trainings were useful, they were not necessarily tailored to community boards, for example a training on parliamentary procedure was conducted by an outside group that generally works with corporate boards.

Board Members come to their positions with a broad range of professional experience, and Working Group members noted that this has resulted in many board members lacking the necessary understanding of important processes, such as implementing Roberts Rules of Order, writing resolutions, commenting effectively on land use and zoning matters, or reporting conflicts of interest. The burden has instead fallen to the district managers and their staff to provide in-depth trainings, which some have more capacity to do than others, once again creating inequities across boards.

Because each board is tasked with creating and enforcing its own bylaws, Working Group participants reported, ensuring active participation from board members and enforcing issues with their conduct can be difficult. They reported that a lack of consistency in and enforcement of attendance policies can lead to some unfortunate "members in name only," who do not attend meetings, but are not removed as the board's bylaws may allow or even require. Additionally, some district managers reported that there is a lack of clear procedure for addressing interpersonal issues that may arise between board members and staff, or between members and other members. Some also reported being aware of conflicts of interest within

their membership, particularly in regard to housing and land use matters, that were going unreported and/or unaddressed.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**2A. REQUIRE PROSPECTIVE MEMBERS TO ATTEND AT LEAST TWO MEETINGS BEFORE APPLYING, AND PROVIDE INFORMATION ABOUT ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES WITH THE APPLICATION.** This will ensure that prospective board members are familiar with board procedures and the necessary time commitment before committing to becoming a member.

**2B. CREATE AND REQUIRE CONSISTENT TRAINING FOR BOARD MEMBERS ON ZONING, HOUSING AND LAND USE, AND MEETING PROCEDURES.** The Civic Engagement Commission and/or the Central Staff should go beyond simply providing informational materials and work with relevant agencies, such as the Departments of City Planning and Housing Preservation and Development and community partners, to create in-depth trainings on these subjects that are required for all board members in all boroughs to take before they start their term and with regular refreshers throughout their time as a member.

**2C. PROVIDE CONSISTENT GUIDANCE FOR CREATION AND ENFORCEMENT OF BYLAWS,** including attendance and conduct policies and procedures for removing board members.

**2D. MAKE CITY EMPLOYEE TRAININGS AVAILABLE FOR BOARD MEMBERS.** This should include Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO), Ethics, Sexual Harassment, and Reasonable Accommodation.

**2E. REQUIRE ALL BOARD MEMBERS TO SUBMIT CONFLICT-OF-INTEREST DOCUMENTATION TO THE BOARD OFFICE AND BOROUGH PRESIDENTS ANNUALLY** and provide clear information about procedures.

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**3. THE BUDGET CONSULTATION PROCESS**

**THE ISSUE:** The Charter mandates a strong role for community boards in the City’s process for developing its annual budget. They are responsible for creating a Statement of Needs for their district, holding public hearings on budget priorities, and consulting directly with City agencies to discuss priorities. The boards can then submit up to 40 capital budget requests and up to 25 expense budget requests to the City’s Office of Management and Budget. The agencies are then required to respond formally to these requests during preparation of the Preliminary Budget. Board members and staff also have the opportunity to testify at the City Council’s budget hearings.

Under the de Blasio administration, the City developed new tools to help streamline this process, including an online platform that the Department of City Planning (DCP) launched in 2016, with the goals of better aligning the District Needs Statements with budget priorities, standardizing the way the boards deliver this information, and assisting City agencies with accessing and identifying relevant requests and quantifying the types of requests coming from all the boards.

While these are laudable goals, this platform has created issues that need to be addressed. Working Group members reported that DCP did not consult with the boards during development of this platform, and the result has been a system that is better at facilitating City functions than supporting meaningful local input. The initial platform was clunky and drop-down menus were not conducive to unique features and needs of community districts. However, many community board staff agreed to work with DCP, attend trainings, and play a role in making improvements to the system, with the understanding that the ultimate result would be a more fruitful consultation process with more meaningful feedback provided by City agencies and the opportunity to aggregate all the boards' requests to create a more clear picture of citywide needs.

However, Working Group members reported that those goals have not been met. The platform has been tweaked to make it more user-friendly since it was first introduced, but budget consultations have not improved, and in fact have become less transparent. District managers said that data they previously received from the Mayor's Office of Operations about 311 complaints in the district to help inform their requests is no longer provided, and that the one-on-one consultations they used to have with many City agencies, including the Department of Transportation, New York City Police Department, and Department of Parks and Recreation no longer take place. Rather, these meetings are now held at the borough level, leaving no room for board staff to raise district-specific needs and have them addressed. The onus is on the boards to request one-on-one meetings if they want them. As stated by one district manager, the group consultations provide a broad scope of the agency's budget, but are not detailed enough to provide a real picture of how the individual boards will be accommodated.

As a result, a small but seemingly growing number of boards do not participate in the budget consultations at all.

Furthermore, agency responses to specific budget requests have declined in quality. An analysis of agency responses to budget requests from the 18 Brooklyn community boards gleaned that of over 900 requests submitted, nearly 75% of the responses provided lacked any substance, including such feedback as, "funding for this request cannot be determined at this time," "further information is required," or "it is recommended that this request be brought to

your elected officials.” For example, a review of boards’ consultations with the City’s Human Resources Administration (HRA) in recent years showed that HRA responses tended to take the form of program descriptions or milestone reports, rather than budget updates or clear responses to specific requests. Reporting that “everything is fine” and that agencies do not have further needs (as they are currently instructed to do by the administration) does not allow community boards and agencies to work together to meet community needs.

As one community board representative said, “We put a lot of time and effort on budget consultations and District Needs....We need to have a better mechanism for response from the agencies for our requests.”

The City Council’s budget hearings provide a good example to build off for the budget consultation process. During these hearings, agencies provide a detailed and specific review of their budgets, including changes in the course of the current fiscal year, any major issues related to the budget, a projection of current trends to out-years, as well as analysis and highlights of their capital budgets. Having access to this information during the budget consultation process would help the boards put their requests into the broader City context and assess district-specific budget priorities vis-a-vis citywide priorities and any anticipated financial challenges.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**3A. REGULARLY PROVIDE DATA TO COMMUNITY BOARD STAFF**, such as a summary of monthly 311 complaints from the Mayor’s Office of Operations, to assist the boards with preparation of the District Needs Statements.

**3B. REQUIRE ALL AGENCIES THAT ARE REQUIRED BY THE CHARTER TO DO SO TO OFFER INDIVIDUAL CONSULTATION MEETINGS WITH BOARDS** in addition to the current borough-level meetings. The Office of Management and Budget could assist with this process.

**3C. REQUIRE ALL AGENCIES TO PROVIDE MEANINGFUL FEEDBACK** regarding the boards’ budget requests. The Mayor should make it clear to agency representatives that simply stating, “needs further study,” and/or other such comments noted above are insufficient.

**3D. PROVIDE MORE DETAILED BUDGET INFORMATION TO BOARDS**, similar to the information provided by each City agency to the City Council, so board representatives have the opportunity to provide meaningful testimony.

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#### **4. TECHNOLOGY, COMMUNICATIONS, AND OUTREACH**

**THE ISSUE:** Community boards serve as a critical bridge for communication between the government and the general public. The Charter mandates boards to disseminate information to the public; to collect the public's complaints, requests, and inquiries; and to track and communicate directly with local community-based organizations.

Yet the boards struggle with a lack of awareness of their work from the general public. As one district manager put it: "Our main challenge communication-wise is a lack of public knowledge of community boards and an overall lack of civic engagement from our constituents."

On top of this, communicating with the public is increasingly complex, and the day-to-day responsibilities related to this mandate have presented challenges that are directly related to those already raised regarding staffing, budgets, and inconsistent or unavailable training and assistance. Boards are currently responsible for upgrading and maintaining their own technology; one district manager reported spending approximately \$185,000 of their limited budget over the last five years on technology upgrades. All 59 boards currently rely on one person for IT support; while participants in the Working Group reported that he was quite responsive, they agreed that more support would be helpful.

Though DOITT is assisting boards with building functional websites as mandated by the 2018 Charter update, boards' websites currently range from basic to extensive depending on their in-house capabilities or their financial capacity to contract outside help. Experience using social media (and therefore what platforms are used and how) also varies widely and training is not available. As the COVID-19 pandemic has forced boards to conduct meetings virtually or hybrid (simultaneously in-person and virtual), some boards have struggled with this shift, affecting the public's ability to meaningfully participate in meetings.

The Charter requires boards to make their meetings available for broadcast or cablecast, but boards choose to meet this requirement in different ways. Some boards choose to pay for livestreaming of their meetings on their website or social media, while others require participants to join the virtual meeting to watch online. Meanwhile, the digital divide remains an issue. Some boards choose to pay local public access television to broadcast their meetings to those who may not be able to watch online, while others do not. Some boards also address the digital divide by using Every Door Direct Mailing through USPS to contact district residents with important information and meeting notices, while others rely on online notifications. This lack of consistency from board to board in how they reach their constituents creates confusion on behalf of those who might want to participate, and all of this (software used to design flyers, broadcasting contracts, printing, mailing) digs into the boards' already limited budgets.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**4A. PROVIDE COMMUNITY BOARD STAFF WITH CONSISTENT TECHNOLOGY TO SUPPORT COMMUNICATIONS**, such as computers and design software, internet connectivity, website platforms, livestreaming capabilities, and hybrid meeting setups.

**4B. PROVIDE COMMUNITY BOARD STAFF WITH THE NECESSARY TRAINING** to use all of these efficiently, as well as social media.

**4C. ENSURE THAT THE BASELINED BUDGET INCREASE FOR COMMUNITY BOARDS INCLUDES SUFFICIENT FUNDING TO COVER THE COST OF NON-DIGITAL COMMUNICATION**, including printing and mass mailings.

**4D. EXPAND RESOURCES FOR INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AVAILABLE TO COMMUNITY BOARD STAFF**, to be provided by the new Central Staff.

**4E. PUBLICIZE COMMUNITY BOARDS THROUGH AN ONGOING PSA CAMPAIGN** to make the public aware of what the boards do and opportunities to participate. This naturally should be developed in partnership with the boards citywide.

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**5. LAND USE AND ZONING**

**THE ISSUE:** Community Boards play a crucial role in the land use process. While the opinions they issue in the ULURP process are advisory, their recommendations often influence outcomes when they are carried through negotiations. Community boards must also hold a public hearing as part of the ULURP process, and so serve a crucial role in involving stakeholders in decision making on these issues. Under the City Charter section 197-a, community boards also have the authority to develop their own plans and submit them to the City Planning Commission and City Council for approval.

The rules and procedures surrounding zoning, land use, and housing are notoriously complex. Working Group members reported that training provided for board members by Borough Presidents, the Civic Engagement Commission, and/or third-party organizations are inconsistent or unavailable. This means boards often rely on the expertise of their membership, which varies widely. As one board representative put it, "We should not have to rely on the hope and chance that community members with this type of expertise will apply for board membership and that the Borough President's staff will review applications to make sure such experts are appointed."

Regarding the creation of “197-a plans,” as the plans that boards may develop under that section of the Charter are known, the number of plans created in recent years has dwindled due to lack of capacity within the boards to undertake this work, combined with the lack of implementation of previous plans that have been passed.<sup>12</sup> One Working Group member said, “City adherence to 197-a plans and/or other formalized community planning recommendations... would better ensure that communities will invest in these planning efforts.”

The Civic Engagement Commission’s Annual Report acknowledges this issue: “In an ideal world, community board budgets could incorporate funds to hire professional land use experts on staff as was the case prior to the Giuliani administration. It is also important to consider the Charter allows for 197-a plans, and without funding, bottom-up participatory planning remains unrealized.” The report indicates that the CEC is developing a “consultant program...to fulfill the mandate to support community boards with ‘neutral’ urban planning resources,” but does not clarify how this program will work or what, if any, budget will be provided for consultants.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, Working Group members reported issues with holding meaningful public hearings. Specifically, as outlined above, the shift to virtual and/or hybrid meetings has created difficulties. Working Group members also reported not being able to access translation services for meetings, meaning language-isolated individuals are excluded from participation. As one Working Group member pointed out, “(This leaves) out many of the nearly 50% of my (district) that is foreign born. Land use decisions often impact these more vulnerable community residents harder.”

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**5A. PROVIDE EACH COMMUNITY BOARD WITH A STAFF LINE AND FUNDING FOR A PROFESSIONALLY TRAINED PLANNER,** to be hired by each board.

**5B. CREATE AND PROVIDE CONSISTENT TRAINING FOR BOARD MEMBERS IN ZONING, LAND USE, AND HOUSING** that is required and regularly available for all new members, and as a refresher for existing members.

**5C. ENSURE THAT COMMUNITY BOARDS HAVE NECESSARY TECHNOLOGY AND SPACE TO HOLD MEANINGFUL HEARINGS** in person, online, and hybrid.

**5D. PROVIDE COMMUNITY BOARDS WITH TRANSLATION SERVICES AND CHILD CARE FOR ULURP HEARINGS,** so that the public can meaningfully participate.

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<sup>12</sup> Flynn, Gerard. “5 Challenges to de Blasio’s Promise of Inclusive Planning.” City Limits, April 1, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> NYC Civic Engagement Commission 2021 Annual Report. October 2021.

## CONCLUSION

Community boards are the most local, grassroots form of City government, and the connection we provide between our communities and our elected officials and City agencies is important for a healthy democracy. We have always been small but mighty, accomplishing a lot with a little. However, as the city emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become even more clear that the resources provided are insufficient for us to effectively carry out our responsibilities, including our critical role on the frontlines of managing both local and citywide crises. The Future of Community Boards Working Group is hopeful that the new, incoming leadership of our city will seriously consider these recommendations, and proactively work with us to solve the issues that stand in the way of our collaborative success.

Contact us: [futureofnyccommunityboards@gmail.com](mailto:futureofnyccommunityboards@gmail.com)

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS BY ACTOR

<b>AGENCY</b>	<b>RECOMMENDATION</b>
<b>MAYOR/MAYOR'S OFFICE AND AGENCIES</b>	<p>1A. Baseline an increase in Community Board budgets for FY 2023.</p> <p>1B &amp; 4A-4C. Provide consistent funding for all community boards for technology upgrades and to cover the cost of non-digital communications.</p> <p>1C &amp; 5A. Create and fund positions for professional urban planners to be hired by each board.</p> <p>1D. Create a centralized office ("Central Staff") tasked specifically with working with community boards.</p> <p>1F &amp; 5C. Conduct a physical needs assessment of community board offices and ensure they are accessible have space to hold hearings (DCAS).</p> <p>3A. Regularly provide district-level 311 complaint data to community board staff.</p> <p>3B. Require all agencies that are required by the Charter to do so to offer individual budget consultation meetings with boards. (OMB)</p> <p>3C. Require all agencies to provide meaningful feedback in the budget consultation process.</p> <p>3D. Provide more detailed budget information to boards, similar to what City Council receives.</p> <p>4E. Publicize community boards through an ongoing PSA campaign.</p>

<p><b>CIVIC ENGAGEMENT COMMISSION AND/OR NEW COMMUNITY BOARD “CENTRAL STAFF”</b></p>	<p>1E. Provide consistent guidance for board staff on human resources.</p> <p>1G. Create a formal, regular convening of community board staff and a digital platform for information sharing.</p> <p>2B &amp; 5B. Create and require consistent training for board members on zoning, housing and land use, and meeting procedures.</p> <p>2C. Provide consistent guidance for creation and enforcement of bylaws.</p> <p>2D. Make City employee trainings available to board members.</p> <p>4A &amp; 4B. Provide community board staff with technology training and support.</p> <p>4D. Expand resources for information technology available to community board staff.</p> <p>5D. Provide community boards with translation services and child care for ULURP hearings</p>
<p><b>BOROUGH PRESIDENTS</b></p>	<p>2A. Require prospective members to attend at least two meetings before applying and provide information about roles and responsibilities of membership with the application.</p> <p>2E. Require all members to submit conflict-of-interest documentation to the board offices and Borough Presidents annually.</p>