



Asian American Federation

Testimony to the New York City Redistricting Commission August 22, 2022

Thank you for holding these hearings and giving the Asian American Federation (AAF) the opportunity to testify regarding the City Council redistricting process. I'm Jo-Ann Yoo, the Executive Director of AAF, where we proudly represent the collective voice of more than 70 member nonprofits serving 1.5 million Asian New Yorkers.

Last month, we released a report highlighting that the New York City Asian voting-age population grew 19.5%, from 2013 to 2020, the fastest growth of any racial group. Additionally, almost 70% of Asian voting-age citizens are foreign-born, and almost 40% of Asian voting-age citizens had limited English proficiency in 2020. Furthermore, our research shows that not only is our community the fastest-growing in our State and or City, our community is dispersed, growing beyond traditional ethnic enclaves and into new areas of the Bronx, Staten Island, South Brooklyn and throughout Queens.

Two weeks ago, we released our yearly language briefs, comprising in-depth quantitative research on the linguistic diversity of our City's Asian community. More than 40 languages are spoken within the Asian community of New York City. Nine of these languages are spoken by more than 15,000 people according to the most recent American Community Survey.

So when we talk about communities of interest, AAF is looking not just at ethnic communities, but also linguistic communities. In our civic engagement work, language access continues to be a critical limitation to our community members exercising their franchise, and this effort must take into account our linguistic diversity in keeping our communities together.

Work done by the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) identified 16 Asian communities of interest across New York City, eleven of which are in Queens: Richmond Hill/South Ozone Park, Ozone Park, Elmhurst, Jackson Heights, Woodside, Flushing, Bayside/Auburndale, Oakland Gardens, Floral Park-Queens Village-Bellerose-Glen Oaks, Briarwood, and Jamaica Hills.

The Redistricting Commission should already have the boundaries of these communities of interest.

The Asian American Federation requests that the Redistricting Commission consider the work put into the Unity Map, and give particular importance to keeping together the submitted Asian communities of interest in accordance with the Voting Rights Act and the New York City Charter, including the South Asian community of Richmond Hill that has consistently been divided, the Korean community in Bayside that has seen increased growth since the last Census, and the growing and already-significant Nepali and Tibetan communities of Woodside and Jackson Heights.

Persistently marginalized communities, such as the South Asian community of Richmond Hill and Ozone Park, are marginalized in part because their voice is divided into multiple Council districts. The draft map has their community now split into four Council districts. The growing Nepali and Tibetan populations of Woodside and the Korean community of Bayside, both Asian communities of interest, have been newly split up in the draft map in contravention of Section 52(1)(c) of the New York City Charter, "District lines shall keep intact neighborhoods and communities with established ties of common interest and association, whether historical, racial, economic, ethnic, religious or other."

We must do better. Keeping our communities of interest together means protecting the voting power of the fastest-growing racial community in the City. Keeping our communities of interest together also means protecting the future growth and influence of our immigrant communities across Queens. We do not have to split up communities just as the unprecedented diversity of Queens is becoming reflected at City Council, and unfortunately the draft map does exactly that instead of seeking to protect our ethnic communities' voting power.

Finally, I want to bring to the Commission's attention the disorganized, hurried and entirely inaccessible process of soliciting the public's feedback on this districting exercise. While I waited for three hours to testify at this hearing after being rescheduled from another one that was full, I repeatedly asked when I could testify, only to be told that while I was pre-registered, the staff had no way to inform the Commission that I was present and ready to submit testimony. Only after an exasperated conversation with staff did I finally get to the mic. I raise this experience because at AAF, accessibility is the first issue we take up in our policy advocacy. From language accessibility to process accessibility, the districting engagement process clarified just how far the City's civic engagement practices have to go regarding both. If I find

this difficult and frustrating, only to persist and provide my testimony after a three-hour wait, I can only imagine the tenacity an immigrant with limited English proficiency must muster to participate in a process formative to how they interact with the City.

At the Asian American Federation, our goal throughout this process is to make sure the Districting Commission acknowledges the new and burgeoning Asian communities that deserve to be together over the next decade of elections and policy making, while protecting the growth in voting power of established Asian communities and neighborhoods.

Thank you for allowing me to speak today, the Asian American Federation will be submitting our recent Civic Engagement report and our language briefs for the record for the Commission to study.