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Districting Commission,  
253 Broadway, 3rd Floor,  
New York, NY 10007

Re: Proposed Council District 12 Maps (June-July 2022)

To the Members of the Districting Commission,

Greetings to my esteemed colleagues of the Districting Commission. I thank you for your time. Before Kevin C. Riley, the Council Member, I was and still am true to Kevin Christopher Riley, a young boy born to Jamaican immigrants who migrated to the 12th District in hopes to create a better life and legacy for the future of their family. As a product of this community, it has been an honor to serve and represent the district. This district has made me the person I am today, and this would not be possible without the foundation, pillars and resources that have built our community. It is the reason why I have dedicated both my personal and professional life to this district. It is the reason why I have sought out to further my roots, stay in the Bronx and raise my growing family here.

Like many members of this community, whose stories are similar to mine, this neighborhood, in its essence, is much greater than a map, greater than just the numbers. It is our past, present, and future. Critical investments of time, labor, and the fight for resources have uplifted our neighborhoods to the home it is today. The momentum built from our collaborative actions fuels the continued charge to advocate for the betterment of this district. With the proposed preliminary maps as they are now, this would undoubtedly dismantle the dynamic of this community. My story is a testament to how your community can build you, and I urge the Commission to uphold the true and historical essence of our district.

To give a snapshot of my life, and show how this district has naturally existed as a connected entity for over three decades – I was born in the Olinville area along Bronx Park in the late 1980s. In the early 1990's, my mother purchased a house in what we know as "The Valley", while my father's family layed roots in the revolutionary Mitchell-Lama known to us as Co-Op City. Like many families here, my parents wanted to invest in our futures and create generational wealth. For a Jamaican immigrant, coming to America meant a place of opportunity- and the Northeast Bronx was and still is home to one of the largest Jamaican diasporas in the City of New York.

My schooling started at Immaculate Conception on Gun Hill Road and I attended there until the 7th Grade, then 8th Grade being at Our Lady of Grace on Bronxwood Avenue. At Immaculate, we played our recess games on Capuchin Way, and hung out at Magenta Playground afterschool with our classmates. During the summers, all the parents from the Valley would send us kids to day camps, and with limited resources, trips to Haffen Park were extremely frequent as it offered a number of facilities. I endearingly recall the concrete of the old Haffen Park Pool, now adorned in vibrant colors from the city's "Cool

Pools” initiative. Last year, after years of advocacy from the community, we were able to solicit the support of former Mayor DeBlasio who agreed to a \$43 million dollar allocation to upgrade the park’s facilities. A major negotiation win for a newly elected Council Member but a more impactful quality of life win for a young boy from the Valley.

My family worked extremely hard and with an abundance of studying, dedication and a mother who did not play, I was able to attend Mount Saint Michael in the Wakefield section of our District for high school. My first job in high school was a part of the New York City Summer Youth Employment Program, specifically with the New York Public Library, where I served as a Library Page at the Eastchester Branch, located right on Gun Hill Road. Gun Hill Road is not only where I would later come to serve my community in the Office of The New York State Assembly Speaker, but Gun Hill Road is also where my office as Council Member of the 12th District is now located, neither of these locations along Gun Hill Road remaining in the District, in this iteration of the proposed map.

Frankly, the only time I ever left the district was to attend college, and even on weekends, I would carve out time to be home. The same kids I went to schools and summer camps with, I now have the pleasure of working with – engaging with them as they develop their professional careers while they contribute to our shared Bronx future. My old teachers are now my constituents, and my mentors, like Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie, have helped me navigate the complexities of public service. When we look at the context of just how recently Black & Latino communities were able to ascend to the halls of government – we cannot afford to avoid addressing the context of the district’s demographic makeup. Without inherent access, our power has come from community collaboration and the building of institutional knowledge. This also shows just how interwoven and close-knit the community is here in the Northeast Bronx – and how every day we are working together to change our outcomes. From edge to edge, this district has formed me. And right now, those experiences, and the resources that come with it are in a more compromised state. Every reference point I have listed is now going to be split into not two, but three council districts.

I urge you to reconsider the boundary lines, and seek feasible alternatives to restore the fragmented neighborhoods in Gun Hill and The Valley. My neighbors in Gun Hill were fractured in the last redistricting, and in this redistricting we are losing even more of the region. Access to municipal services that Council Offices like mine provide are crucial to positive outcomes – and in most instances, residents will have double the travel time (particularly via public transportation) to get what they need. Approximately 47% of the cases my office has seen come from 10467 and 10469 – and those residents will now have to navigate a changing government structure, trying to figure which of three districts they would reside in along a singular mile’s stretch of the primary thoroughfare, Gun Hill Road.

Even in the age of Zoom, not all of the residents of my community have that access. Many residents here lack the fiscal and infrastructural requirements to access the internet, and even reliable phone service. There is a great necessity for in-person services, and to make them accessible. This impact is seen most greatly by the loss of Gun Hill Houses, a valued development that has a senior population with limited access to car ownership who will go from a bus ride of under 10 minutes to a multi-phase ride averaging a half hour. It is also noteworthy, that as the New York City Housing Authority has given city developments the offer to convert into Project-Based Section 8 developments, that Gun Hill Houses would be last Section 9 development in the Northeast Bronx – and if districted out would leave none.

The 12th Councilmanic District is unique to the effect that, by population, it has stabilized as a majority African American community. Based on the 2020 Census, the Neighborhood Tabulation Area (NTA) for Williamsbridge-Olinville has 60% Black residency and Eastchester-Edenwald-Baychester, which encompasses what is known to the community as “The Valley,” has 68%, compared to the entire Borough which has 28% percent. In 2019, via the Census’ American Community Survey, it was estimated that the region has a homeownership rate of 39.1% with 60.2% of homeowners identifying as Black. In a system where, historically, black homeownership has been difficult to ascertain, neighborhoods like The Valley, specifically, have prevailed as a pocket of promise, keeping the “American Dream” alive for

families like mine and so many of my neighbors. It is imperative that we protect this community by keeping them intact.

As this iteration of the current map shows, removing the Valley would uproot and jeopardize the work and support that our community, elected officials and CBO's like the Bronx Neighborhood Housing Services CDC Inc. has provided in addressing significant issues faced by this community. Bronx NHS provides services to expand and strengthen homeownership opportunities, whether you're a first time homebuyer or at risk of foreclosure and need access to appropriate loans and grants. Since taking office, we have been able to advocate to restore ~370K annually for the last two fiscal years, providing sustaining funding post-pandemic. This funding is directly supporting the homeowners of Council District 12 with these resources supporting the homeowners of the Valley, especially in the context of ensuring resilience with a fiscal crisis looming.

The growth of the region has taken off in the last couple of decades, with many of the homes being original or second iteration constructions from the 1920s-1970s. This is remarkably younger than a number of neighborhoods in the city, where land, and infrastructure, has gone through multiple iterations of development. For residents in the Valley, a fight has endured to meet growing infrastructure demands regarding internet, transportation, and critical systems like our city's stormwater system. Residents face frequent internet outages, hindering their access to services.

Additionally, there is no public transportation that runs directly through The Valley, with these services only at the neighborhood's ends at Gun Hill Road, Bartow Ave, and Boston Road. This community is facing the impacts of neglectful city planning that did not take into consideration the need for stormwater management for a low-elevation neighborhood developed over what was once Mill Creek, the Hutchinson River, and Rattlesnake Brook so every time it rains, residents find themselves struggling to stay above water - both physically and financially. Preceding and during my tenure, residents have started to more concretely organize on this issue, especially with the imminent threat of climate crisis, so dividing our current consolidated power furthers us from their justifiable goal of obtaining quality municipal services.

It has taken decades of investment, building upon the Neighborhood Stabilization Program of the 1970s and a commitment to coalesce that the Northeast Bronx has the district we know and love today – and to infract upon a community that is both finding its footing and fighting to preserve their neighborhood amidst natural disasters, predatory lending schemes and systemic racism is frankly, catastrophic. As my colleague, now State Zellnor Myrie, had brought up in the last set of redistricting hearings in 2012 – increased minority representation has led to tangible changes in outcomes that have outlined and curated support for communities of interest, but benefit the community as a whole such as foreclosure prevention and housing repair efforts.

Furthermore, as it stands there are a number of community institutions, such as Mindbuilders Creative Arts Inc. in Olinville, that hold significant meaning to District 12 – and subsequently there has been sustained funding, most recently receiving over 250K from council funding and initiatives. In the proposed maps, Mindbuilders is separated from the rest of their new district by a river and a parkway, and would be effectively othured by the existing landscape. This also holds to be the case for the Evander campus, where families and educators fought for years for funding and finally, together we have secured 778K for capital improvements in FY 23 to the cafeteria, locker room, tech/labs, and pool to restore this institution to its original glory, and undo the traumas of redlining. As this process has only just begun, it is imperative that this is seen through, and that there is reliable access to funding. The surrounding neighborhood for Evander would be split into three districts. While one can make the arguments that with school choice in high schools, that the impact will be offset, but this disparity remains evidenced by the fact that the neighborhood for P.S.076 - The Bennington School, a zoned elementary school, is also being split up into these three districts. The fiscal enfranchisement of this neighborhood coupled with the long community advocacy and organizing has been a lifetime of work endeavored by the community, and it would be remiss for the Commission to hinder that.

In conclusion, I hope not only my personal experience resonates, but exemplifies how unified our community is and how we have been able to accomplish remarkable growth with the resources our district has been able to access. The past and present experience, the true cultivation of homeownership and resources will be taken away to support other council districts. It is essential to be mindful of the council dollars that support the needs of the community. I encourage the Districting Commission to keep District 12 true to its historical context. Breaking up District 12 would not only dissolve the voting power of one of the most marginalized communities in our City, it would be detrimental to the progress and opportunity for generational wealth and creating long lasting change for our community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "K. Riley". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Kevin C. Riley  
Council Member, 12th District  
New York City Council