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May 29, 2023

Testimony of Council Member Lynn Schulman to the 2026 Quadrennial Advisory Commission for the Review of Compensation Levels of Elected Officials

Dear Commission Members:

I represent the 29th Council District in Queens, and I am proud to serve as Chair of the New York City Council Health Committee.

I am writing in support of increasing the compensation for city elected officials, in particular, the New York City Council. The last full review of elected official compensation in New York City took place in 2016. In the years since, elected officials have received no cost-of-living adjustments, even as the cost of living in New York City has risen dramatically. In addition, as Council Members, we have costs associated with the position that are not reimbursable by the City Council, including transportation to community events, tickets to community and citywide events, and the like, all of which come out of our personal pockets. Further, many of us work 7 days a week and are on call for emergencies 24 hours a day.

Despite the Charter's intent for periodic review, this Commission was not convened for nearly a decade, leaving the process dormant during a period of significant economic change. This is not a matter of privilege; it is a matter of public policy. When compensation fails to keep pace with inflation and the real cost of living in one of the most expensive cities in the world, we risk narrowing who can realistically afford to serve in public office. While discussions regarding elected official compensation can generate understandable public scrutiny, particularly at a time when many New Yorkers are facing economic pressures themselves, it is important to compensate elected officials so that we can fulfill our responsibilities without compromise.

We also need to keep in mind that with the new ranked choice voting process implemented in 2021, there are now more women, LGBTQ+ and other marginalized communities being elected to office – these communities historically have faced low wages in the workplace. In addition, in the City Council, there are several new mothers who face additional economic hardships when presented with salaries that can barely keep them afloat.

From my perspective, this is a cost-of-living adjustment, not a raise. There is an important distinction. A raise implies compensation above and beyond what was previously contemplated. A cost-of-living adjustment simply ensures that compensation retains its real value over time, consistent with how inflation and economic conditions have evolved. Across city government, annual or recurring cost-of-living and wage adjustments are a standard part of maintaining competitive and sustainable compensation. In recent years, many municipal employees received annual increases in the range of approximately 3 percent per year through collective bargaining agreements. During that same period, elected officials received no adjustments at all. The principle underlying COLA adjustments is widely recognized across the public sector and should inform this Commission's review as well. Inflation-adjusted analysis demonstrates that compensation for elected officials has lost substantial real value since the last review in 2016.

To put this request in perspective, the salary of New York City Council Members is much lower than their peers in other major cities (smaller than NYC), including Los Angeles, CA, where the base annual salary for Council Members is \$244,000; San Francisco, CA, where the Bd of Supervisors annual salary is \$175,370 and Washington, DC where salaries range from \$154,000 to \$171,000, depending on seniority and other factors.

This brings up another issue which I believe is important for the Commission to consider. In 2016, when the salaries for New York City Council Members was increased, there were several give-backs that actually resulted in the salary being comparatively lower – 1) Committee Chairs could no longer get stipends and 2) and the ability of Council Members to receive outside compensation was severely restricted. This has had the result of deterring potential candidates from running for office, which is something we want to encourage, not discourage.

I urge this Commission to examine the cumulative impact of inflation and make a recommendation grounded in principles of fairness, equity, and economic reality.

The responsibilities of a City Council Member constitute a full-time public service role by any reasonable standard. We write and pass legislation, oversee agencies, represent hundreds of thousands of constituents, respond to emergencies and constituent crises, and work to make every neighborhood in this city safe, stable, and livable. The restrictions placed on outside income for elected officials are significant and appropriate, but they also mean that compensation must be sufficient on its own to allow people from all walks of life to serve. If we want the Council to reflect the diversity of New York City, including working families, immigrants, LGBTQ+ individuals, teachers, nurses, small business owners, and first-generation New Yorkers, then the compensation structure must make that possible.

As a further issue to take into consideration, last year Council employees formed a union and staff now receive periodic increases based on the contract that was negotiated. In some instances, though rare, staff get paid higher salaries than Council Members. Getting a fair increase for the elected officials would help address that imbalance.

In closing, the current stagnated salary structure narrows the pipeline of who can realistically run for office and serve.

I commend this Commission for its work and for the seriousness with which you are approaching this review. I urge you to recommend a cost-of-living adjustment that accounts for the extended period without review since 2016, reflects the current economic realities of New York City, and ensures that public service remains accessible to all New Yorkers, not just those who can afford it.

Thank you for your consideration of my testimony.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L.C. Schulman', with a stylized, cursive flourish at the end.

Lynn C. Schulman

New York City Council Member, 29th District