CITIZENS UNION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
Testimony to the Council Governmental Operations Committee
On Best Practices for Recruitment and Appointment of Community Board Members

March 3, 2014

Good morning Chair Kallos and members of the Governmental Operations committee. My name is Alex Camarda. I am the Director of Public Policy and Advocacy at Citizens Union. Citizens Union is an independent, non-partisan, civic organization of New Yorkers who promote good government and advance political reform in our city and state.

Citizens Union in 2010 as part of our review of the city charter for the City Charter Revision Commission, issued a report with an in-depth examination of numerous issues facing community boards.[1] We took positions in the report supporting fixed budgeting for community boards, believing community boards should receive a budget in the aggregate that is 30 percent of the Council's budget (or about 65 percent of all the borough presidents' total funding), with rent, heat, electricity and other variable expenses part of the regular budget process. We also support providing urban planners to boards independent of the borough presidents' offices to provide assistance on technical land use issues. This will provide community boards with needed resources to ensure they have a distinct voice in the land use approval process.

Citizens Union's recommendations related to community board recruitment and hiring are:

1. **Reform the process for selecting members to community boards. Make boards more** professionalized and accessible to the communities they serve by creating **a formal standardized and transparent process for filling community board positions**. Citizens Union recommends the city charter be amended to:
    a. **Require written applications and interviews of all appointees or re-appointees by the borough presidents;**
    b. **Establish a deadline of 30 days for filling vacant positions; and**
    c. **Require borough presidents to issue an annual report detailing their outreach efforts, whom they notified of the process, methods used and the demographics of those serving on community boards in comparison to the communities served by the boards.**

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[1] See the full report at:
http://www.citizensunion.org/www/cu/site/hosting/Reports/0610CU_Charter_Revision_Report&Recommendations.pdf, with the community boards chapter on pages 37-41.

2. Community board members should be limited to serving five consecutive two-year terms. This limit on terms should be phased in prospectively so terms are staggered to ensure there is not a mass exodus of institutional knowledge from the boards.

Process for Recruiting and Appointing Community Board Members
As detailed in the attached chapter from our charter revision report, Citizens Union found in our 2010 evaluation of community boards that the recruitment and appointment processes at each of the 59 boards vary greatly. The City Charter imposes some standardization, requiring each community board have up to 50 voting members, appointed for two-year terms without limits on the number of terms served. Borough presidents appoint the voting community board members, with half of the appointees nominated by council members representing the district.

In practice, however, community boards often have many fewer than 50 active members and vacancies are quite common, as a total of 2,950 people are required to fill all the positions on each of the 59 boards. Nearly 20 percent of the positions on Manhattan boards, for example, were vacant in 2006.[2] While some boards reflect the diversity of the communities they serve, others do not and are largely controlled by members who have served for decades, and even chairpersons that have held the post for similarly long periods. Boards also vary greatly in members' fiscal and urban planning expertise, which affects their ability to evaluate and submit land use proposals, and indicate budget priorities.

Reforms to the Recruitment and Appointment
To reduce vacancies, make boards more reflective of the community they serve, and diminish patronage, former Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer revamped the process of appointment. He created a standardized formal application process for community board positions with community and civic groups vetting applications. Citizens Union was an active participant in that process and at the invitation of former Borough President Stringer, evaluated resumes to determine if candidates were qualified based on criteria developed by his office in conformance with the law. Stringer and his staff then interviewed candidates from among those applicants deemed qualified by outside groups, and made appointments. Former Borough President Stringer required all sitting community board members to reapply when their two-year terms expired and committed to the civic and community groups that he would only hire from the pool deemed qualified. His office so strongly believed in this process that even when vacancies occurred mid-term, the office sent resumes to participating groups for review, rather than only conducting the civic group review at the end of members' terms. According to Borough President Stringer's office, by 2010 this revamped process resulted in the filling of every vacancy, 1,700 new applications, 1,400 interviews, and the appointment of 500 new members since 2006.[3]

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[2] Recommendations to the New York City Charter Revision Commission," Office of the Manhattan Borough President Scott M. Stringer, May 2010, p. 11, Available at: http://www.mbpo.org/uploads/CharterRevisionReport2.pdf
[3] "Ensuring Meaningful Community-Based Planning And Community Governance: The Future of Community Boards and the New York City Charter," Office of the Manhattan, Borough President, Scott M. Stringer, April 19, 2010, Available at: http://mbpo.org/uploads/ensuringreport3.pdf

Borough Presidents' Support for Reform
During Citizens Union's candidate evaluation process this past year, newly elected borough presidents Gale Brewer (Manhattan), Eric Adams (Brooklyn), James Oddo (Staten Island) and Melinda Katz (Queens) all indicated support for at least some of Citizens Union's recruitment and appointment reforms in questionnaires completed by the candidates for Citizens Union, as shown on the chart below. In particular, all borough presidents taking office this year support a more formalized and standardized process for filling appointments.

Borough President	What is your position on designating urban planners for use by community boards and **requiring borough presidents to report to the Council the manner in which they advertise and make community board appointments? (Int. No. 913)**	**What is your position on establishing a formal, standardized and transparent process for community board appointments including written applications, interviews of candidates, and filling vacancies within 30 days?**	Do you support standardizing term limits to five consecutive two-year terms for members of all community boards?
Adams[4]	Support	Support	Support
Brewer[5]	Support	Support	Oppose
Katz[6]	Support	Support	Support
Oddo[7]	Oppose	Support	Will Consider

Citizens Union's Reform Legislation
Citizens Union during the last Council drafted a bill (see attached) to reform the process of community board recruitment and appointment consistent with our positions on page 1 of this testimony, a derivation of which was introduced by former Councilmember Leroy Comrie (Int. No. 913 of 2012)[8] and co-sponsored by now Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito, and current Council leaders Brad Lander, Majority Leader Jimmy Van Bramer, Debi Rose, and Jumaane Williams.

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[4] See Eric Adam's 2013 Borough President questionnaire for Citizens Union at:
http://www.citizensunion.org/www/cu/site/hosting/VoterDirectories/2013_Questionnaires/Adams-BkBP.pdf
[5] See Gale Brewer's 2013 Borough President questionnaire for Citizens Union at:
http://www.citizensunion.org/www/cu/site/hosting/VoterDirectories/2013_Questionnaires/MBP_Brewer.pdf
[6] See Melinda Katz's 2013 Borough President questionnaire for Citizens Union at:
http://www.citizensunion.org/www/cu/site/hosting/VoterDirectories/2013_Questionnaires/QBP_Katz.pdf
http://www.citizensunion.org/www/cu/site/hosting/VoterDirectories/2013_Questionnaires/Oddo-SIBP.pdf
[7] See James Oddo's 2013 Borough President questionnaire for Citizens Union at:
http://www.citizensunion.org/www/cu/site/hosting/VoterDirectories/2013_Questionnaires/Oddo-SIBP.pdf
[8] See: http://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=1189798&GUID=A1C91459-3705-437D-845E-DBEE37919783&Options=Advanced&Search=&FullText=1

The charter amendments in our draft bill are modeled on the successful practices put in place by Borough President Stringer, although Citizens Union is flexible as to whether borough presidents choose community board appointees without or without outside groups determining whether applicants are qualified. The draft bill requires written applications be submitted for community board positions and a subset of applicants be interviewed. Civic and community groups vet submitted applications, determining whether applicants are qualified according to criteria created by borough presidents. Borough presidents are also required to submit an annual report detailing their procedures for filling community board positions including providing modes of outreach to advertise positions and statistics on diversity of the boards in relation to the communities they represent.

Our draft bill adapted by former Councilmember Comrie does not include our recommendation that community board members be limited to five consecutive two-year terms, with members on the board turning over in different years. We established the term limits position after the bill's drafting, believing – as we did for recruitment and appointment reforms – that term limits would result in a membership that better reflects the ever-changing demography of the city's neighborhoods, while injecting new thinking and approaches to the manner in which boards address the development of their communities.

I thank you for the opportunity to present Citizens Union's views on community board reform. I welcome any questions you have.