



CITIZENS UNION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
Testimony to the City Charter Revision Commission

Pratt Institute
June 19, 2018

Good afternoon Chair Perales and distinguished members of the New York City Charter Revision Commission. My name is Rachel Bloom and I am the Director of Public Policy and Programs at Citizens Union. We thank you for inviting us here today and giving Citizens Union the opportunity to publicly share our recommendations on community board reforms with you.

Together, our positions on community board reform seek to strengthen community boards, providing them with additional resources, while also ensuring that there is a more rigorous selection process and open process for appointment of members.

Our positions are as follows:

- 1. Community boards should receive an independent budget allocation** that is not at the discretion of the mayor or council. We believe that they are currently insufficiently funded, and greater resources are essential for community boards to carry out their Charter-mandated responsibilities as an advisor on land use, planning, and budgeting. To this end, community boards should be provided enough funding to be able to hire staff with land use and/or budgetary expertise. The budget for community boards should be linked to that of borough presidents' offices, which should be linked to the City Council's budget (Citizens Union also supports independent budgeting for the Borough Presidents). Community boards in total should receive 65% of the borough presidents' allocation, with each board receiving an equal amount in addition to allocations to cover offices, electricity and heat, which would still be determined through the regular budget process.
- 2. A mechanism should be created that provides an available pool of urban planners independent of the borough presidents' offices that can be accessed by community boards.** This is critical to provide meaningful and informed input on land use decisions and to develop 197-a plans. These urban planners should be connected to one or more boards, thereby establishing relationships with those boards and the larger communities they serve. While housing urban planners with the borough presidents is aligned with their current

responsibilities to “establish and maintain a planning office...for the use, development or improvement of land located in the borough” under section 82 of chapter 4 of the City Charter and to “provide training and technical assistance to the members of the community boards” it could become problematic when the borough president may disagree with a community board on a land development issue. Given their distinct roles in ULURP and past instances in which borough presidents have sought to remove community board members who have not aligned their votes with the sentiments of the borough presidents on land use proposals, it is essential that the independence of the community boards, and the urban planners that serve them, be maintained.

- 3. Reform the process for selecting members to community boards.** Community boards are too often plagued by vacancies. To professionalize and open the boards to the communities they serve, a formal standardized and transparent process should be created for filling community board positions, as was first done by former Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer. While there have been some more formalized procedures for filling vacancies among the borough presidents, they vary enormously from borough to borough. We recommend that one formal appointment process is used throughout the City. Language should be added to the City Charter that:
 - Requires written applications and interviews of all appointees or reappointees by the borough presidents;
 - Establishes a reasonable deadline for filling vacant positions; and
 - Requires 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.

- 4. Community board members should be term limited, serving five consecutive two-year terms.** This limit on terms should be phased in prospectively to ensure there is not a mass exodus of institutional knowledge from the boards, while ensuring that representation on boards can keep pace with changing demographics of communities and does not become inaccessible to the communities they serve.

I thank you for the opportunity to present Citizens Union’s views on community board reform.