



**Testimony to the New York City Council Committee on Governmental Operations on
Charter Revision Commission (Int. No. 241-2018)
March 16, 2018**

Good morning Chair Cabrera and members of the Committee on Governmental Operations. My name is Ethan Geringer-Sameth and I am the Public Policy & Program Manager at Citizens Union. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the Council proposal for Charter Revision Commission.

Citizens Union is an independent, non-partisan civic organization of New Yorkers that promotes good government and advances democratic reform in our city and state. As part of our mission, we focus on ensuring that governmental processes are fair, transparent, and responsive to the diverse needs of New Yorkers. In 2010, Citizens Union conducted an extensive analysis of the New York City Charter and produced a comprehensive set of over 50 recommendations for reform. Enough time has passed since the last time the Charter was examined fully that we need to take a hard look at the structure of city government.

To this end, we are excited to see such interest in reform, embodied by calls for a Charter Revision Commission, but are not taking a position in support of creating a commission either through the Mayor or City Council. Instead, we are testifying today on certain aspects of Int. No. 241.

Firstly, we believe that there should be diversity amongst the appointment authorities to a commission. This bill would provide appointments from a range of officials, including the Mayor, Council, Public Advocate, Comptroller, and the five borough presidents, which reflects the type of diversity we support

Secondly, any Charter Revision Commission, whether convened by the Mayor, City Council, or otherwise, should take the transparency of its proceedings very serious and should engage the voices of New Yorkers throughout the process. This can be done by having open meetings that are public and well-publicized; proactively engaging with community groups, experts, and other stakeholders; and an extensive and concerted public education campaign. This last point – public education – is especially important if the Charter Revision Commission will be placing referenda on the ballot in an election year that promises to have especially low turnout, as 2019 does. Public engagement and education will also be essential to mitigate confusion and a potential lack of confidence

in the process that may arise from having two commissions simultaneously, as will be the case if both the Council and the Mayor convene a commission.

Thirdly, we would like to point out that while the Mayor's commission would likely seek to place referenda on the ballot of the 2018 General Election (as reported), the Mayor has the ability to call for another commission immediately after disbanding the previous one. This raises the prospect of having two parallel Charter Revision Commissions for more than one election cycle, which has the potential to confuse voters, and could result in conflicting referenda being posed to voters on the same ballot, which could further confuse voters.

For this reason, Citizens Union urges the Council and Mayor to come together to hold a single Charter Revision Commission that takes a concerted look at the New York City Charter. A single commission has the same authority to accomplish the task of two commissions, without redundancy, waste, or conflict. And without undermining the public confidence in the effectiveness of such a mechanism for change.

As aforementioned, Citizens Union has rigorously explored the Charter and looks forward to participating in future conversations, meetings, and hearings related to Charter Revision Commissions. Thank you for seeking Citizens Union's testimony today. I welcome any questions you may have.