



CITIZENS UNION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
Testimony before the 2025 City Charter Revision Commission
Input Session on Housing and Land Use
February 11, 2025

Dear members of the 2025 Charter Revision Commission. My name is Ben Weinberg, and I am the Director of Public Policy at Citizens Union. Thank you for providing us with the opportunity to speak before you today.

Citizens Union is a nonpartisan good government group committed to reforming New York City and State government by fostering accountability, honesty, and the highest ethical standards, and advocating for political reform and fair and open elections.

Throughout its more than 125-year history, Citizens Union has supported periodic comprehensive reviews of the New York City Charter absent a political agenda via the appointment of an independent Charter Revision Commission to ensure that city government is operating effectively, efficiently, and in the public's best interest. We have advised every Charter Revision Commission over the years, and many of our recommendations have been adopted into the City Charter, from creating community boards through abolishing the Board of Estimate and expanding the City Council to implementing Ranked Choice Voting and the public campaign finance program. This experience informs our recommendations today.

New York City is facing a serious housing crisis. It has a severe shortage in housing units overall and in affordable housing in particular. It needs to produce more housing and provide better opportunities for New Yorkers to obtain, and remain in, reasonable housing.

We appreciate the Commission's goal to review sections of the City Charter addressing planning, housing, and development, and recommend changes that would improve the state of housing in our City. We are not opining at this time on individual changes you may be considering to these sections.

However, we wish to comment on the recent proposals to substantially alter the powers of city officials on land use matters. Specifically, the Commission would likely receive proposals aimed at shifting final decision-making power on land use matters from the City Council to the Executive Branch, the City Planning Commission, or other entities. This raises fundamental questions about the structure of City Government and the system of checks and balances established by the 1989 City Charter, which has been in place for the past three and a half decades.

As a general matter, Citizens Union believes that the problem of New York City housing is not a problem of the New York City Charter, but rather of the lack of a more comprehensive vision and of coordination

between the Executive and Legislative branches. Our housing shortage is not the result of flaws in the structure of government, but how these branches of government operated and the politics that drove, and still drive, their decisions.

In the past decades, the City has taken a piecemeal approach to dealing with housing and planning. For the most part, the City Planning Commission has not engaged in citywide zoning reform or a more general planning program to achieve housing objectives that take into account the housing needs of our entire city of over 8 million people. Administrations have generally pursued neighborhood-based or single-site proposals to increase housing.

The City Council, in approving or disapproving these narrow proposals, has generally deferred to the one (or two) Council Members representing these sites—members whose positions are often (and somewhat understandably) strongly focused on the particular interests of their specific community rather than on citywide needs.

It is therefore gratifying to see some recent shift in the political winds, with the Mayor and Council working together to pass the City of Yes—a program that updated the zoning laws across the city, not just in a single neighborhood. This and similar, or even more comprehensive, efforts can be achieved under the current Charter.

We believe that the keys to such further successes are the willingness of the Executive Branch to develop and present housing and other development programs of a broad scope wherever possible, and the willingness of the Mayor and Council to coordinate from an early stage in such programs. Continuing the political jockeying between the City Planning Commission and the Council on narrow proposals is a steep price to pay for the millions of City residents who cannot find or afford a place to live.

We also note that, as a general principle, zoning is a law which determines how land may be used, and thus changes to that law should rest in the hands of the Council as the legislative body. The Mayor has a strong role in this process, through the City Planning Commission, which has the sole power to introduce plans, controls the land use agenda, and decides what proposals to bring before the Council. As the recent experience with the City of Yes has shown, this structure has the capacity to produce positive change and more housing.

In sum, the Executive and Legislative Branches must work together on more general zoning provisions and more comprehensive planning, under the current structure of government. This approach would prioritize the needs of the City as a whole over the politics of a single neighborhood or a specific development site. And it would provide New Yorkers with more certainty as to the future of housing in their community and the built environment around them.