

## **CITIZENS UNION'S POSITIONS ON THE 2025 BALLOT QUESTIONS**

### **QUESTION 1: LAKE PLACID OLYMPIC SPORTS COMPLEX EXPANSION**

#### **What you'll see on your ballot**

Proposal Number 1, an Amendment: Amendment to Allow Olympic Sports Complex In Essex County on State Forest Preserve Land

*Allows skiing and related trail facilities on state forest preserve land. The site is 1,039 acres.*

*Requires State to add 2,500 acres of new forest land in Adirondack Park.*

*A yes vote authorizes new ski trails and related facilities in the Adirondack forest preserve.*

*A no vote does not authorize this use.*

#### **Citizens Union's position**

CITIZENS UNION **SUPPORTS** THIS PROPOSAL

#### **Why we support this proposal**

The entire Adirondack Forest Preserve is protected under the NYS constitution. That means whenever there is any proposed change in the use of acreage for other than forest preserve purposes, the proposal must go to the voters. This is true despite the many land uses within the Preserve that are not strictly forest. One example are Olympic facilities. Lake Placid, surrounded by the Preserve, has hosted two Winter Olympics and many other international competitions.

The proposal on the ballot involves one of the facilities that hosts Olympic-level events and other competitions, Mount Van Hoevenberg. Though most of this sports complex is on public land not specifically in the Preserve, some of the facilities and utilities are now in Preserve land, and there is a proposal to use a further couple of hundred acres to upgrade the facilities so they can remain as hosts of competitions. The proposed amendment would remove the portion of the Preserve now used for the complex from the Preserve, along with other acreage needed for facilities and infrastructure, for a total of 323 acres. In exchange, the amendment requires that the state purchase at least 2500 acres of land to add to the preserve, with the Legislature to determine that such lands are equal to or greater in value than the land released from the Preserve.

Both the Adirondack Council and Protect the Adirondacks recommend a Yes vote, as does Citizens Union. The change would recognize what has already occurred, and allow the area to maintain its position as one of the world's major competitive winter sports facilities while providing an economic boost to an area in need of such activity. It should also result in a net gain of over 2000 acres to the Preserve without damaging the character of the Preserve.

## QUESTION 2-5: CITY CHARTER AMENDMENTS ON LAND USE AND HOUSING

New York City is facing a severe housing crisis, with shortages in both overall housing units and affordable housing in particular. The 2025 Charter Revision Commission undertook a careful, judicious inspection of the City’s planning and land use process, resulting in a set of reforms that would alleviate some structural barriers to housing production while preserving key opportunities for public intervention and accountability. We encourage New Yorkers to vote Yes.

Citizens Union considers Questions 2 through 5 to be important steps in the right direction. These reforms would move us toward a land use review system that better serves the public interest. They introduce meaningful changes to the balance of power over land use in City Government, aiming to reflect the original intent of the 1975 and 1989 charter revision overhauls - intent that some argue has been allowed to deviate from its purpose over the years. The proposals still maintain the core functions of the City Council, Mayor, Community Boards, and other entities involved in zoning decisions.

The proposed policies themselves are complex and nuanced, and are described below in brief. We encourage voters to review the ballot abstracts and media coverage of the referenda to gain a deeper understanding of each proposal’s details.

Further progress in housing also will require additional non-Charter measures, such as changes to state law, reallocation of resources, and cooperation between the mayor and the City Council that prioritizes the needs of the City as a whole.

## QUESTION 2: FAST TRACKING AFFORDABLE HOUSING

### What you’ll see on your ballot

Proposal Number 2, a Question: Proposed Charter Amendment: Fast Track Affordable Housing to Build More Affordable Housing Across the City

*Fast track publicly financed affordable housing. Fast track applications delivering affordable housing in the community districts that produce the least affordable housing, significantly reducing review time. Maintain Community Board review.*

*“Yes” fast tracks applications at the Board of Standards and Appeals or City Planning Commission.*

*“No” leaves affordable housing subject to longer review and final decision at City Council.*

### Citizens Union’s position

CITIZENS UNION **SUPPORTS** THIS PROPOSAL

## Why we support this proposal

Nearly all zoning changes currently go through the lengthy Uniform Land Use Review Process (ULURP), which grants final approval authority to the City Council. This amendment would create two new zoning review processes for certain affordable housing projects, expediting approval timelines and removing the Council's final say.

First, the proposal would allow publicly financed affordable housing developers to seek zoning approvals from the Board of Standards and Appeals (BSA) instead of the City Planning Commission and City Council, as is currently done under ULURP.

These projects would undergo Community Board review and a BSA public hearing, and could only be approved if consistent with neighborhood character and otherwise unbuildable under current zoning. While Citizens Union has some concerns about expanding the BSA's policymaking role in substantive land-use decisions, we believe on balance this expedited option should be supported, as it is appropriately targeted to projects for low-income residents, which are urgently needed.

Separately, projects that participate in the City's Mandatory Inclusionary Housing (MIH) program and are in the community districts that produce the least affordable housing would also be fast-tracked. Community board and borough president reviews would occur simultaneously, the City Planning Commission review would be limited to 30 days, and the City Council would no longer have final approval. This change could spur much-needed affordable housing development in areas where it is currently lacking and greatly needed. Given that MIH would now be codified in the Charter as part of this review process, the program's effectiveness should be closely monitored.

## QUESTION 3: EXPEDITED LAND USE REVIEW PROCEDURE

### What you'll see on your ballot

Proposal Number 3, a Question: Proposed Charter Amendment: Simplify Review of Modest Housing and Infrastructure Projects

*Simplify review of modest amounts of additional housing and minor infrastructure projects, significantly reducing review time. Maintain Community Board review, with final decision by the City Planning Commission.*

*"Yes" simplifies review for limited land-use changes, including modest housing and minor infrastructure projects.*

*"No" leaves these changes subject to longer review, with final decision by City Council.*

## Citizens Union's position

CITIZENS UNION **SUPPORTS** THIS PROPOSAL

## Why we support this proposal

This amendment would create an Expedited Land Use Review Procedure (ELURP) for certain land use changes. Instead of the regular ULURP timeline, reviews by community boards and borough presidents would occur simultaneously, the City Planning Commission review would be limited to 30 days, and its decision would be final - removing the City Council from the process.

The expedited process would apply to certain categories of housing, resiliency, and infrastructure projects, including increases in residential capacity up to 30%.

If the faster tracking procedures in Questions 2 and 3 incentivize more construction, City Planning will be under added pressure to handle an increased number of applications and will face tighter deadlines to complete its reviews. It is essential that expedited process not come at the expense of substantive deliberation by planning commissioners, who would need to be supported by an adequately staffed department.

## QUESTION 4: AFFORDABLE HOUSING APPEALS BOARD

### What you'll see on your ballot

Proposal Number 4, a Question: Proposed Charter Amendment: Establish an Affordable Housing Appeals Board with Council, Borough, and Citywide Representation

*Establish an Affordable Housing Appeals Board with the Council Speaker, local Borough President, and Mayor to review Council actions that reject or change applications creating affordable housing.*

*"Yes" creates the three-member Affordable Housing Appeals Board to reflect Council, borough, and citywide perspectives.*

*"No" leaves affordable housing subject to the Mayor's veto and final decision by City Council.*

## Citizens Union's position

CITIZENS UNION **SUPPORTS** THIS PROPOSAL

## Why we support this proposal

One impediment to New York City's ability to achieve citywide housing objectives has been the City Council's practice of "member deference." In approving or disapproving zoning proposals, the Council has generally deferred to the one or two

member(s) representing these sites, whose positions are often (and somewhat understandably) strongly focused on the particular interests of their specific community rather than on citywide needs. Citizens Union supports this proposal to ensure that a single council member can't derail a housing project crucial for the future of the city, restoring a better balance between the interests of individual communities and those of the city as a whole.

This amendment would create a three-member Affordable Housing Appeals Board - comprised of the Mayor, the Council Speaker, and the relevant Borough President - that could override Council decisions that rejected or changed projects that directly facilitate the development of affordable housing. This would replace the rarely used mayoral veto and Council override process.

Citizens Union recognizes risks in this approach. The borough president would often serve as the swing vote, elevating the office's power substantially. While borough presidents represent larger constituencies than individual Council members and have a history of involvement in land use decisions, the old Board of Estimate shows how the role can be vulnerable to misuse. Increased borough president powers would likely draw heavy special interest lobbying and campaign spending. Ethics, transparency, and pay-to-play safeguards should accompany this change to protect the integrity of the new board. We note that the Council's member deference system, by effectively concentrating power in a single representative with veto power over developments, has also opened the door to ethical misconduct in the past.

We also recognize that the borough president might often reflect the community wishes, but we have seen instances where borough presidents have shown a broader perspective than local Council members in considering projects, and we believe that, for the focused category of affordable housing, this proposal provides an appropriate balance that allows for broader perspectives to shape policymaking.

## QUESTION 5: CITY MAP MODERNIZATION

### What you'll see on your ballot

Proposal Number 5, a Question: Proposed Charter Amendment: Create a Digital City Map to Modernize City Operations

*Consolidate borough map office and address assignment functions, and create one digital City Map at Department of City Planning. Today, the City Map consists of paper maps across five offices.*

*"Yes" creates a consolidated, digital City Map.*

*“No” leaves in place five separate map and address assignment functions, administered by Borough President Offices.*

### **Citizens Union’s position**

CITIZENS UNION **SUPPORTS** THIS PROPOSAL

### **Why we support this proposal**

The City Map defines streets, grades, parkland, and public places. Today, it exists as over 8,000 individual paper maps spread across five borough offices. This outdated system delays many housing and infrastructure projects that require map confirmation or alterations. The proposal would centralize administration of the City Map at the Department of City Planning, and require it to be digitized within a number of years. Citizens Union supports this modernization as a sensible improvement to a basic but essential city service.

## **QUESTION 6: EVEN YEAR CITY ELECTIONS**

### **What you’ll see on your ballot**

Proposal Number 6, a Question: Proposed Charter Amendment: Move Local Elections to Presidential Election Years to Increase Voter Participation

*Move the City’s primary and general election dates so that City elections are held in the same year as Federal Presidential elections, when permitted by state law.*

*“Yes” moves City elections to the same year as Federal Presidential elections, when permitted by state law.*

*“No” leaves laws unchanged.*

### **Citizens Union’s position**

CITIZENS UNION **SUPPORTS** THIS PROPOSAL

### **Why we support this proposal**

Despite significant efforts to improve our elections in recent years, voter participation in New York City’s municipal elections has continued to decline, with the most recent election suffering from record-low turnout of just 23%. Such low participation poses a serious challenge to the long-term democratic legitimacy of our local government. This problem is compounded by the uneven nature of turnout: our local electorate is substantially older, whiter, and wealthier than the city’s overall voting-age population.

A key reason for this low participation is that New York City holds its elections off-cycle. During odd-year elections, less information is available, resources for voter engagement are limited, and voter fatigue is higher - leading most voters to stay home. In contrast, turnout in even-year presidential elections has remained steady for decades at around 60%. For every New Yorker who votes for mayor, nearly three vote for president. While the off-cycle election calendar may have had noble intentions when introduced over 130 years ago, today it serves primarily to depress voter participation.

Citizens Union is a driving force in the efforts to align the timing of municipal elections with high-profile, high-turnout federal or statewide elections, and we strongly support this proposal by the Charter Revision Commission. Moving local elections to coincide with presidential elections would dramatically increase voter turnout for offices from Mayor to City Council. It would also help close participation gaps, particularly among young voters and voters of color, drawing an electorate that is more representative of our city. Additionally, this change would save the City tens of millions of dollars annually, according to the Independent Budget Office. New York City should join the many states and cities—including Los Angeles, Baltimore, Phoenix, Austin, El Paso, and Las Vegas—that have successfully moved their local elections to even years.

To implement this change, New York State must take action. The state has already begun moving in this direction by passing a law to shift county and town elections to even years and proposing a constitutional amendment to do the same for cities. This Charter amendment positions New York City to make the transition as soon as the State allows so and signals to Albany lawmakers that New Yorkers want to strengthen their democracy

Citizens Union urges a YES vote on Proposal #6.