



CITIZENS UNION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

**Testimony before the City Council Committee on Governmental Operations,
State & Federal Legislation**

250 Broadway – December 16, 2025

Introduction 1493-2025 (Williams)

**Compensation of the mayor, public advocate, members of the city council,
borough presidents, comptroller and district attorneys**

Dear Members of the City Council Committee on Governmental Operations,

My name is Grace Rauh, and I am the Executive Director of Citizens Union. Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today.

For over a century, Citizens Union has worked to ensure honest and accountable government, fair and open elections, and a civically engaged public. We have been involved in many previous cycles of elected officials' salary reviews over our long history, and this experience informs our testimony today.

Elected officials should be well paid. High compensation attracts strong candidates for office, allows people who are not wealthy to consider public service, helps keep out incentives for corruption, and symbolizes the importance of serving the people. Citizens Union has historically supported better pay for elected officials.

There are also valid arguments for raising current salaries. Council Members and other officials have gone almost a decade without a pay adjustment, and the cost of living in New York City has increased significantly.

Importantly, it is entirely possible for elected officials in New York City to get a raise through an honest and transparent process. Unfortunately, the proposed legislation before you today does not do that.

It represents a stark break from over fifty years of tradition in our city of using independent compensation commissions to drive the salary-setting process, accepted by city council that preceded you since the 1960s.

It offers no supporting analysis for the proposed 16% pay increase. Even if that figure is reasonable, or possibly even low, establishing a precedent where lawmakers set their own pay

without analysis or public review invites future abuses, suggests self-dealing, and undermines trust in government.

It is being moved forward in a rushed, eleventh-hour effort, attempting an end-run around the legal ban on approving salary bumps during a lame duck period by holding a hearing today and expediting the legislative process early next term, in clear contradiction of the intention of the City Charter time restriction and opening the door to potential legal challenges.

And lastly, it seeks a retroactive raise, no matter when the bill is passed, which might be a first for this Council.

Council members should not move this bill forward. Instead, you should pursue your long-awaited salary bump through an honest, transparent, and credible process.

Why should council members go through the normal compensation commission process?

Every increase in elected officials' salaries over the past fifty years has been enacted after a commission of experts reviewed compensation levels and offered recommendations.

Compensation commissions provide an independent, transparent, and data-driven process for setting salaries. They engage in an open evaluation of key questions, like: How high should the raise be? Should it apply equally to all offices? When should it take effect? And should reforms accompany the raise?

And they serve both the public and elected officials.

Compensation commissions serve the public interest by preventing self-serving decisions. Without a commission, lawmakers could set their own pay with little accountability or analysis made to determine an appropriate pay increase. Compensation commissions also serve lawmakers' interests. Even justified salary raises can be politically unpopular. Independent commissions are designed to take politics out of the decision and help officials achieve a pay increase through a credible and more independent process.

That is why compensation commissions have been used every time the City Council has approved a raise in the past half century.

New York State also uses a compensation commission for recommending salaries for legislators, judges, and executive officials. In addition, [twenty-one states use](#) compensation commissions for legislative salaries.

What should council members do to get a raise if the mayor does not convene a commission?

Under [a 1986 law](#), every four years the mayor must create a Quadrennial Advisory Commission for the Review of Compensation Levels of Elected Officials (a pay review commission was used even before it was codified in law). Commissions were set up in 1979, 1987 (Koch), 1991 (Dinkins), 1995, 1999 (Giuliani), 2006 (Bloomberg), and 2015 (de Blasio).

Unfortunately, several mayors have ignored the mandate to establish a commission, including Mayor Bloomberg in 2003 and 2011, Mayor de Blasio in 2020, and Mayor Adams in 2024.

Since no commission has been convened since 2015, salaries have remained unchanged for nearly a decade. Before that, salaries remained unchanged between 2006 and 2016 because commissions were not convened in those years.

Although current law offers no enforcement mechanism if the mayor refuses to establish a commission, the City Council has the legislative power to make the appropriate changes that would lead to the establishment of a commission. These options have been at the Council's disposal for the last several years.

We recommend the Council take one of the following steps:

1. Call on Mayor-elect Mamdani to appoint a commission in January

The new mayoralty presents an opportunity to ensure the law is being abided by. The City Council could call on the incoming mayor to appoint a compensation commission in the beginning of 2026. The [current bill already](#) requires him to convene a one-time commission before December 31, 2026, though it is unclear why a commission would be needed right after elected officials receive a raise, if the Council moves forward with its ill-advised effort to raise pay for itself without a commission.

Instead, the Council can amend this bill to compel Mayor-elect Mamdani to convene a one-time compensation commission by January 31, 2026, and drop the immediate pay bump before such commission is established.

2. Authorize another elected official to appoint the Quadrennial Advisory Commission if the mayor fails to do so

The Council can amend [Administrative Code 3-601\(a\)](#) to allow another citywide elected official - like the City Comptroller - to appoint the compensation commission if the mayor fails to do so by January 15 of the required year. If the Council passes this bill in early January 2026, a commission could be established soon after.

3. Create a one-time compensation commission for 2026

The Council can pass a law establishing an ad hoc commission to operate in 2026. In fact, the Council is already advancing legislation to do that, as the current pay raise bill instructs Mayor-elect Mamdani to convene a one-time compensation commission in 2026, *after* council members give themselves a pay raise. The bill could be amended to mandate the creation of a Council-appointed compensation commission – rather than a mayor-appointed - that begins without delay, and abandon the effort to achieve an immediate and retroactive raise.

This would not be unusual. Council-created compensation commissions are anticipated by the City Charter ([Section 26\(c\)](#) says, *"If prior to the enactment of a local law increasing the compensation of council members, the council establishes a commission to study and make recommendations for changes in the compensation levels of council members..."*), and one-time legislative approvals have been done before - in 2006, [the City Council gave the mayor the permission](#) to skip the 2007 Quadrennial Advisory Commission appointment.

4. Sue the mayor to compel him to establish the commission

The Council, or another official, can seek a court order requiring the mayor to comply with the law mandating the appointment of a compensation commission. The City Council has sued mayoral administrations for refusing to carry out local laws, [most recently in 2024](#). It could have taken this step at any point in the last five years.

In summary, there is no need for the Council to rush through this flawed legislation when it can use similar legislative means to achieve the same result without breaking a half-century of precedent that has served New York City well.

Council members can indeed get fair compensation that benefits New York City government while keeping the integrity of the salary-setting process. We look forward to working with Council Members to promote that shared goal.