City Council
Joint Committee on Oversight and Investigations and Public Housing
Testimony of Brooklyn Borough President Eric L. Adams
Tuesday, February 6, 2018

My name is Eric L. Adams and I am the Brooklyn borough president representing 2.6 million Brooklynites, including 99 New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) developments, roughly equivalent to the population of Utica, NY.

In the past few weeks, I have heard from at least 19 developments facing heating complaints, potentially impacting nearly 40,000 residents during one of the coldest stretches over the past year.

Too many tenants did not get the services they deserve, and I appreciate that our City recognizes the need for immediate action.

New York City has been the sole government stakeholder to take any semblance of responsibility for this crisis, putting real money on the table to address emergency repairs and its infrastructure backlog, most recently by announcing the allocation of $200 million in long-term funding for heating upgrades. Despite this needed injection of funding, this amount still only represents 0.8 percent of NYCHA's estimated "State of Good Repair" capital funding deficit of $25 billion.

NYCHA has put forward some of these ideas through its NextGen proposals, and we should see those proposals, and any others involving City assets, further discussed through a robust community process. However, beyond this, more clearly needs to be done to meet the increasing and ongoing demand to provide safe, secure, and healthy housing for the hundreds of thousands of residents across the City who call NYCHA developments home.

Even without Albany and Washington, NYCHA has the ability to meet this challenge by better prioritizing its existing resources, expediting its bureaucratic

procurement process, and improving its communication and transparency with its tenants.

Yesterday, I organized scores of NYCHA tenants at the Gowanus Houses in Brooklyn to call on NYCHA, the Fund for Public Housing, and the State to do just this by addressing low-hanging fruit actions that will go a long way to recapture existing savings, generate additional resources through further public-private partnerships, and cut red tape in order to speed up project implementation.

To start, NYCHA must do more to reinvest the savings it has accrued through its important energy efficiency programs and retrofits.

According to "Room to Breathe," from July 2017 by the Citizens Budget Commission (CBC), NYCHA saved $48 million in utility costs from 2013 to 2016 due to lower natural gas cost expenditures, which were made possible from converting from oil to natural gas heating systems.

Unfortunately, that $48 million was not dedicated specifically to reinvestment in additional conversions but rather went back to the NYCHA General Fund. This revenue stream should go directly to more conversions so cost savings can increase, creating a virtuous cycle of support for NYCHA.

This is a perfect example of smart policy leading to substantial savings and we need to continue down this path until we are certain all residents have a 21st century heating system that is reliable and clean.

History has shown us that we shouldn't expect additional funding from Albany, but today we're demanding action from the State.

Last week, myself, and more than 50 other elected officials demanded an "emergency declaration" to expedite funding and resources to make crucial improvements to NYCHA infrastructure. To date, the City and State have not declared such an emergency even though it is needed yesterday.

More importantly, Governor Cuomo and the State Legislature must act to empower New York City by passing "Design-Build" legislation to fast track project implementation.

Design-Build allows one contractor to design, build, and install necessary infrastructure, shaving months off the implementation of projects.

Governor Cuomo has empowered his own agencies to use this tool to fast track State projects, but in the constant game of political gamesmanship between the Governor and the Mayor, the Governor has held New York City residents and taxpayers hostage by failing to empower City agencies to use this cost and time-savings tool.

We also must do more to foster public-private partnerships to support current NYCHA residents. There are thousands of former residents who have gone on to live successful lives. My office has been reaching out to high-profile NYCHA alumni in an effort to reconnect them to NYCHA as a way to give back to the neighborhoods that fostered them and provided the foundation for their success. This effort also includes initial conversations with the Fund for Public Housing on how to leverage this potential public-private support for capital investments.

Finally we must empower residents with information.

NYCHA must stop viewing tenants as "the opposition." They should be our 'NYCHA' first responders. They are living and breathing the environment every day and we must empower them with real-time data and information to help guide project implementation. I call for the creation of a publicly-accessible NYCHA Capital Project Dashboard that goes beyond just listing whether a reported issue is in progress. This aligns previous efforts from my office to successfully secure maps and a dashboard to publicly track Build It Back and Sandy recovery resiliency projects from the New York City Mayor's Office of Recovery and Resiliency.

While a Mayor's Capital Project Dashboard exists for the entire city, we need a project dashboard specifically for NYCHA capital investments. With a citywide residential population in NYCHA that is larger than most US cities, including Cleveland and St. Louis, we need to do better to ensure that integral projects being undertaken to improve the infrastructure and quality of life for residents are on track and are being implemented in a transparent manner.

I look forward to continuing to work with NYCHA, the residents, this committee, and any and all partners in government to advocate for the resources that residents need and deserve. Thank you.