



OFFICE OF THE BROOKLYN BOROUGH PRESIDENT

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Brooklyn Borough President

**Testimony to the New York City Council
Committee on Governmental Operations
Preliminary Budget Hearing, March 22, 2022**

Good afternoon and thank you to Chair Sandra Ung and the Committee on Governmental Operations for allowing me the opportunity to speak. My testimony today will focus specifically on community boards and their budgets. I was disappointed to see that community boards didn't make it to today's agenda despite this committee having oversight, but wanted to go on record anyway with my comments.

As Brooklyn Borough President, I oversee the borough's 18 community boards, and this is a responsibility I take very seriously. The boards are a critical first point of contact between the public and City government. Yet because of their extremely limited budgets, they are currently struggling to maintain their basic Charter-mandated functions. This is in addition to everything else they have been called upon to do during the pandemic, ranging from pivoting quickly to virtual meetings, to literally feeding their communities in some cases. Community boards have not had a significant baselined budget expansion since 2014, and I was extremely disappointed to see that the new administration has no plans for any budget increase for the boards in the next four years.

You don't need to take my word for it. Earlier this year, a group of District Managers released a report (attached) outlining exactly what they need to do their jobs more effectively. The most critical things that the administration can help address now are the following:

- 1) **Physical spaces:** DCAS helps community boards find office space, but the quality varies widely. District Managers reported a range of issues, from not having light switches in their office or doors on their bathrooms, to being located in non-ADA-compliant buildings, meaning constituents with disabilities cannot physically come to their offices for assistance. We can and must do better.

Additionally, having public meetings is one of the boards' most important functions. Their hearings are an important opportunity for the public to connect with local government. Yet board staff must coordinate space for these meetings with no support from DCAS, meaning they are forced to spend precious staff time finding and securing space that can accommodate a large number of people, is ADA accessible, and meets the standards of Open Meetings Law. This was



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already a challenge before the pandemic. Now that boards have been away from their previous meeting spaces for two years, they are once again forced to go through this process, but with even fewer spaces available to meet their needs. For example, community rooms in hospitals and schools may no longer accommodate public meetings. Other venues may have a vaccine screening mandate in place, which it is our understanding is a violation of Open Meetings Law. Still other spaces may be too small to accommodate social distancing. The boards need support from the City to address this before the Governor's emergency order allowing virtual meetings expires, and from the State to allow hybrid meetings permanently. Which brings me to...

- 2) Technology and Communications:** During the pandemic, many boards had to pivot to entirely online meetings. Yet the technology available and the expertise required to use that technology varies from board to board. The City Charter requires boards to make their meetings available for broadcast, but only some have the tech capability to livestream. The boards' ability to comply with the Charter should not be dependent upon my discretionary budget.

Along those lines, the 2018 Charter Revision required DOITT to assist the boards with building functional websites, but right now the quality of these sites still depends on the board either having its own expertise or the financial means to contract outside help. What's worse, DOITT had one staff member dedicated to helping all of the city's 59 community boards with their technology issues, but he recently left and has not been replaced, leaving the boards stranded at a particularly crucial time. One district manager reported recently waiting weeks for DOITT to create an email address for a new staffer. This is simply unacceptable.

We also need to consider that not all New Yorkers have regular internet access or fluency in English. They shouldn't be left out of the democratic process. Community boards need funding for non-digital communication such as flyers and mailers, as well as translation services for those materials, for their websites, and for their meetings.

- 3) Staffing:** The boards' existing budgets only provide for a minimal number of staff lines, and leave little room to provide competitive salaries, making recruitment and retention of professional staff difficult. Inability to fill vacancies has a major impact on an office with only a handful of staff. Without baselined funding, district managers have difficulty planning for staff expansion long-term, not knowing if the lines will be renewed the next year. Baselining a budget line for a



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staff analyst or community coordinator would make a huge difference in the boards' ability to function efficiently. It would allow them to connect more directly with their constituents and encourage engagement from more diverse populations, including youth.

Additionally, most boards need technical assistance to review complicated land use proposals or to plan proactively for their districts, as the Charter allows them to do. The Civic Engagement Commission has said they are developing a consultant program to provide the boards with urban planning resources but have given no indication of whether or how the boards are supposed to pay for these consultants with their limited budgets. The City needs to instead fund professional urban planners to work directly with the boards.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak today. I want to be a partner with the Council and the administration to dramatically improve the experience of working for and serving on a community board. There is so much more to be done, including making sure board membership reflects our city's diversity, creating and enforcing membership standards, providing consistent trainings and support for board members and staff, and creating a more productive working relationship between the boards and the administration. I hope we can start this year by providing them with some of the basic resources they need to function efficiently, and continue working together to address all of these issues over the next few years.