

New York City Council Committee on Governmental Operations

Chair: Sandra Ung

Committee Members: Gale Brewer, Lincoln Restler, Lynn Schulman, Shahana Hanif

February 28, 2023

Good morning and thank you to Chair Ung and the members of the Committee on Governmental Operations for convening this hearing today. I am Deputy Bronx Borough President Janet Peguero testifying on behalf of Bronx Borough President Vanessa L. Gibson. The task of supporting The Bronx's 12 community boards is an essential function of our office and one that we are continually working to improve. We are also looking to the Administration for more technical assistance and stronger support in order for us to reach our mission of community involvement and local democracy.

This year, our office has transitioned to an electronic application portal that will help streamline the appointment process. The electronic application provides broader access to our residents, will improve collaboration with the Council Members by providing real time updates, and will improve the Office's ability to compile the annual Community Board demographic report. Additionally, we offer the application in Spanish, the only Borough to do so. We are conducting outreach through the Spanish-language press to ensure that we engage all communities. Our goal is to recruit residents who reflect the diversity of The Bronx – and that includes the 46% of Bronxites who speak Spanish at home. These new processes will enable us to accomplish this and give more people the opportunity to apply. This highlights the need for the Administration to provide more assistance for language access to support our community boards.

Furthermore, we are aiming to recruit more young people to participate in their community boards. We are conducting social media outreach and reaching out directly to students through the schools. We want to improve retention among young people as well; however, it has been our office's experience that young community board members are harder to retain, often due to them going away for college. We encourage seasoned board members to mentor new and younger board members.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have made great strides with holding meetings remotely and livestreaming them. Remote meetings tend to increase attendance and participation, especially for individuals who have conflicting work schedules and those who have issues travelling to the meeting space. However, they can also prove more difficult for individuals without the appropriate

technology. In the post-pandemic period, moving to a hybrid model can be a way to get the best of both worlds, while still adhering to New York State Open Meetings Law.

Continuing hybrid meetings will require more investments in technology to help the boards maintain this option. We have had conversations with BronxNet to improve the boards' access to streaming, broadcasting, and recording, but that is not a complete solution, since BronxNet cannot be everywhere. The City should do more to fund the technology and services required for the boards to be able to stream and record their meetings. This could include cameras, microphones, and internet hotspots as well as the training to operate this technology appropriately. We hope that OTI will be able to fulfill this role.

Another challenge that the community boards are facing has to do with location – both their offices and their meeting spaces. Meeting spaces need to be large enough to handle a full community board or committee meeting, be accessible to the members of the public, and able to be equipped with AV technology and internet access. These challenges significantly limit where meetings can take place. There are also security concerns that many members have expressed travelling to meetings.

Community Board offices are often the first stop for residents facing an issue, but inaccessible, distant, and ill-equipped office spaces are a hindrance to the boards' operations. For example, Bronx Community Board 8's office is located at the northern part of the district, bordering Yonkers, and it is not handicap-accessible. Community Board 8 has worked with DCAS since 2017 to secure a new office. This board was in negotiations with a landlord for four years when the landlord gave up waiting on the city to sign the lease and the board was forced to start the process over. No landlord can afford to wait around due to the bureaucratic red tape. Another example is Community Board 4, which is located in the nurses' wing of a hospital. Now more than ever, Community Boards need accessible space to operate and serve the public in an efficient manner.

Presently, at least four of our boards are seeking new district office space. This has become a challenge due to limited space availability and the onerous process to secure new space. We are asking DCAS to work with our boards to provide available space and additional support to accommodate this process.

Another common issue for many of the boards citywide is that the members do not have the requisite planning experience to evaluate land use proposals that come before them. Boards require access to planning services that will be able to assist them in this process by providing professional expertise and provide guidance on these types of land use issues. This cannot be done solely through DCP as the boards

have to provide an independent recommendation on projects. The City Council should consider funding for additional planners that would work directly with the board.

Our office hopes to increase the number of trainings that board members receive and expand our new member orientation. While board members are volunteers and not city employees, they are bound by numerous city policies and require training to fulfill these requirements. Our office has provided trainings on FOIL, COIB, records retention, Roberts Rules of Order, EEO/sexual harassment, interview best practices, conflict resolution, open meetings law, and social media usage. We hope to continue working with DCAS and the Civic Engagement Commission to provide additional opportunities for trainings. We are asking that the Mayor's Community Affairs Unit update the Community Board Handbook, a vital resource for board members that has not been updated 2010.

Overall, the City needs to provide more assistance to community boards to help them achieve their essential mission: ensuring that community voices can be heard in our local government. We need to cut through the red tape and help the boards get the resources, training, and services that they need to fulfill their mandates. Together we can ensure that community boards – and the hardworking and passionate board members who fill them – work even better going forward. Thank you.