



OFFICE OF THE BROOKLYN BOROUGH PRESIDENT

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Good afternoon and thank you to Chair Ung and the Committee on Governmental Operations for holding this hearing today. Like last year, I am here to submit testimony specifically on community boards and their budgets. Also like last year, I was disappointed to see that community boards were not on today's hearing agenda despite this committee having oversight. Community boards are a critical link between the public and City government, weighing in on important issues that impact everything from small businesses to street safety to the availability of affordable housing. I would encourage the Council to devote more attention to the needs of these critical City agencies, which serve as the most grassroots level of City government.

Now in my second year of overseeing Brooklyn's community boards, I have had the opportunity to administer two appointment cycles. My staff and I have truly been inspired by the enthusiasm that Brooklynites have shown for getting more involved in the decisions that shape their communities by joining the borough's 18 boards. Yet because of their extremely limited budgets, the boards are still struggling to maintain their basic Charter-mandated functions.

As my Director of Community Boards, Carol-Ann Church, testified at a hearing last month, staffing is a particular concern. The boards' existing budgets provide for no more than 3-4 staff lines, and leave little room for competitive salaries, making recruitment and retention of professional staff difficult. Increasing their staff budgets would allow them to improve service delivery and better fulfill their role as a liaison between the community and NYC government. The boards also need technical assistance that goes beyond what is currently provided, especially in land use and planning. The Civic Engagement Commission created a list of land use consultants that boards can reference, but these consultants don't work for free, and there is 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.

This is only one example of many wherein the administration has provided inadequate assistance to the boards. District Managers from across the city are asking for support for:

- **Identifying new spaces that are accessible to the public and large enough for in-person meetings:** Critically, two Brooklyn boards are currently facing displacement from their existing offices and DCAS has failed to provide adequate relocation assistance.

- **Human resources:** Chairs receive little guidance on hiring and firing staff and struggle to get positions approved. District managers also need support to prevent and/or address any issues with board leadership, such as discrimination or harassment.
- **Communications and technology:** to support holding and livestreaming hybrid meetings, as well as to produce website and social media content, flyers, and mailers in multiple languages.
- **IT support:** OTI currently has one staff member dedicated to all 59 boards, causing delays – some as long as two or more years --- to critical functions such as creating new email addresses for staff, upgrading websites, paying bills, etc. The way OTI prioritizes requests also leaves community boards at a disadvantage. A non-working desktop or issue with network connectivity is classified as low priority, but in a three-person office, this can mean that critical work simply isn't happening.
- **Equity and accessibility at meetings:** most critically translation services, but also food and childcare.
- **Real engagement from City agencies on the budget process:** Board members feel strongly that most City agencies do not engage in good faith, simply providing canned responses to their budget priorities. This is an unacceptable way for the administration to engage with the people doing the work on the ground in our communities.

Part of the reason for this lack of support is a constant debate about whose responsibility it is. My office is simply not funded to provide the full scope of the support and technical assistance that the boards need to meet and exceed their Charter-mandated functions. That is why I am calling on the City Council to join me in asking the administration to address this problem now.

In the short term, the easiest solution would be for every City agency to have at least one staff person whose sole responsibility is to be a liaison with the city's 59 boards. In the long-term, I support the Future of Community Boards Working Group's call for the creation of a "central staff" where community board staff and members can access a central resource for assistance with technology, policies and procedures, human resources, legal counsel, training, and other needs. I know this is a big ask in a time where we are looking at ways to cut back; however, it's a question of equity. Community boards have not had a baselined budget expansion since 2014. No other City agency goes without vital support services, and the community boards should not have to either.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I look forward to working with the Council and the administration on ways to support our community boards in serving all New Yorkers.