



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN

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BOROUGH PRESIDENT

**TESTIMONY OF MANHATTAN BOROUGH PRESIDENT SCOTT M. STRINGER BEFORE
THE CITY COUNCIL GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS COMMITTEE BUDGET HEARING**

MARCH 7, 2007

Good afternoon, Chairman Felder and members of the committee. Thank you for convening this hearing. Since taking office in January 2006, I have invested great time and resources into reforming and empowering Manhattan's Community Boards.

I did this because I believe in their role as our most locally effective form of government - our town halls. When local residents have a real say in decisions that affect their daily lives, it undeniably shapes our city's future in a positive way.

As Borough President, I am responsible for working with Manhattan's twelve Community Boards and appointing their members. In my 14 months in office, I have seen the intricate day to day functions and struggles of boards.

In the last few years, we have seen Community Boards step up to the challenge of protecting their neighborhoods, whether it is Community Board Four's fight against the West Side Stadium; Community Board Eleven's work reshaping the Uptown New York project; or the 197-A plan put forward by Community Board Six for the entire eastern part of their district. Unfortunately, each of these essential community-based planning successes was achieved despite the abysmal lack of funding for Community Boards.

The truth is that in some parts of our city, Manhattan included, Community Boards have significant room for improvement. However, that does not justify pushing their needs aside. To the contrary, we have a fundamental obligation to give them the resources that will ensure they are the vital government bodies they were intended to be.

Community Boards were created in the 1960's to serve as the community planning entities of New York City's neighborhoods. Each board was expected to have a full time professional urban planner on staff; however this has largely been impossible due to tremendous budget constraints. Starved for resources, financial and otherwise, many boards struggle with the complicated urban planning questions before them.

The City Charter mandates that Community Boards exercise specific powers and fulfill prescribed responsibilities including:

- Long-term community planning (197-a planning)
- Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP)

- Review of applications for liquor licenses and sidewalk cafes
- Review of applications for street fairs and street closings, and
- Community needs assessment – an important part of the City budget process.

As we continue to expect more from the Community Boards, at a minimum it is time to provide them with the funding necessary for them to do their jobs effectively. For FY 2007, each board's Operating Expense Budget was \$194,895, granting the average Manhattan board approximately \$1.56 per constituent (\$1.44 citywide). Unlike larger city agencies, the boards' budgets do not allow them to achieve economies of scale in procurements. Providing an operating expense inflation adjustment in the Boards' budgets would provide some relief.

This failure to significantly increase operating expenses has impacted each board's ability to serve their community in ways both large and small. For example, Community Boards once had Youth Coordinators on staff, which has now been eliminated. In addition, diminishing budgets affect their abilities to meet even the most rudimentary of their Charter-mandated responsibilities, such as adequately informing the public of meetings and hearings.

The power of the boards has been underestimated in the past. However, with reform and empowerment, Manhattan's Community Boards – and, I believe, each of the City's other -47 boards – can give new meaning to the democratic ideal of government by the people and for the people. At their best, Community Boards are the empowered forces of their neighborhoods, but without sufficient funds, they can barely meet their basic responsibilities, much less deal with the complex and varied issues that daily come before them, especially with today's high velocity development and pressing service delivery issues.

The work that our Community Boards are undertaking today makes a clear case for increased funding. Last year a single Manhattan Community Board:

- Reviewed 61 street fair applications;
- Reviewed 16 sidewalk café applications; and
- Reviewed a total of 727 liquor license applications.

Multiply these numbers by 12 for Manhattan and 59 for the entire City and you begin to get an accurate picture of what the boards are asked to do. This does not even begin to take into account the number of service delivery complaints they address or their role in the budget process. In addition, in 2006, Manhattan's 12 Community Boards collectively reviewed over 35 ULURP applications, most without the input or guidance of a staff planner.

Under the direction of my Planning, Land Use, and Development Unit, I created the Manhattan Borough President's Community Planning Fellowship. The program engages outstanding second-year graduate urban planning students in public service, providing them with a practical educational experience, while making their expertise available to each Manhattan Community Board. The program also includes a seminar component that leads the fellows to explore key issues in community planning.

The program has a dual purpose: (1), to enhance the capacity of community boards to undertake planning activities; and (2), to impart to the next generation of urban planners an acute appreciation for local government and the community perspective.

This program is a critical resource for the Community Boards and has received widespread praise, especially for the greatly-needed technical assistance the urban planners are providing. Projects the fellows have engaged in include: creating a community-based rezoning proposal for the East Village within Community Board Three; analyzing residential conversion of Class B office space in Community Board Five; and helping Community Board Ten in Central Harlem to update their 197-A proposal. The success of this program demonstrates what Community Boards can do with more meaningful resources.

In conclusion, the Community Boards continue to face increased demands for service, as well as rising expenses. Simply stated, in order to perform effectively, funding must be increased for our most local form of government; our 59 local Community Boards. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.