



# THE FINAL COUNTDOWN:



## 5 WAYS TO END THE MAYORALTY WITH PROGRESS & RESULTS

September 2020

It is a critical moment for New York City, which is facing concurrent crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, racism, and citywide segregation that continue to deepen inequality. In the final 16 months of Mayor de Blasio's administration, Citizens Housing & Planning Council (CHPC) calls for a new approach to housing in NYC and a better plan for realizing it. There is still time to create a lasting legacy even during this difficult recovery, to make real strides to address racial inequality, leave the city more resilient to future pandemics, and create more high-quality affordable housing that will serve the needs of communities that are often excluded from the benefits of development.

Here, CHPC proposes five housing policies that can conclude the current mayoral administration with progress and results. These policy ideas have no budgetary impact, but huge potential to create a more equitable New York City.

### HOUSING POLICIES FOR A MORE EQUITABLE NYC:

- 1 REZONE SOHO/NOHO FOR A MORE EQUITABLE NEW YORK CITY.**
- 2 EQUITABLE CODE ENFORCEMENT.**
- 3 REGULATORY REFORM FOR BASEMENT APARTMENT CONVERSIONS.**
- 4 ENABLE RESIDENT DECISION-MAKING AT NYCHA.**
- 5 AFFORDABLE HOUSING FOR ESSENTIAL WORKERS.**

# 1 REZONE SOHO/NOHO FOR A MORE EQUITABLE NEW YORK CITY.

HPD's Where We Live report represents perhaps the first acknowledgment by the City that systemic racism and segregation exist, and are sanctioned by the government, even here in progressive New York. The report is full of smart analysis but falls short in proposing concrete solutions; we need more than task forces with vague mandates.

If the administration is serious about the principles laid out in Where We Live, and wants to pursue racial equity in the face of the Trump Administration's threat to roll back fair housing protections, City Hall must pursue opportunities to create affordable housing in high-income neighborhoods that have traditionally been resistant to development.

One example presents itself immediately: the rezoning of SoHo/NoHo. This is a rare opportunity to contribute in both a symbolic and substantive way to racial equity in New York City. But time is running out to elevate the value of affordable housing and equity above that of historic cobblestones and cocktail party handwringing.

# 2 EQUITABLE CODE ENFORCEMENT.

The City's building, construction, housing maintenance, and health codes are meant to keep the built environment safe for everyone. But code compliance is not a policy goal in and of itself. Our city's numerous codes need a checkup to make sure that they are equitable, serving their safety goals, and not working against other important policy objectives.

The City must reframe the purpose of code enforcement to be proactive and goal-oriented rather than reactive and punitive; develop a strategy to equitably deploy enforcement resources; create alternative methods to resolve code violations suited to the situation and commensurate with the risk; and support the development of code enforcement that protects all New Yorkers. Housing code is supposed to uphold housing security, not disrupt it. Particularly at a time when so many are facing financial difficulties, it is critical that our city does not wield outdated regulations against vulnerable residents. We need a new set of standards and rules that better serves all New Yorkers.

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# 3 REGULATORY REFORM FOR BASEMENT APARTMENT CONVERSIONS.

CHPC applauds the administration for initiating the East New York Basements pilot program in 2019 and the City Council for passing legislation that created regulatory reform for basement units. Now we ask that the City follows through with its promise to bring the pilot citywide - especially at a time when the neighborhoods that would benefit

the most are those that have been hit hardest by the pandemic. This program has never been more urgently necessary.

Basement apartment conversions can help low-income homeowners and renters alike. They are a low-cost, efficient affordable housing solution that creates new units with minimal impact on the streetscape. They help reduce crowding, offer protections for residents who otherwise exist in a legal limbo, and most importantly provide safe and habitable living space.

## **4 ENABLE RESIDENT DECISION-MAKING AT NYCHA.**

The City's exclusion of NYCHA, New York's greatest affordable housing asset, from its housing plan is one of the greatest missteps of this administration. As NYCHA falls deeper into disrepair with ballooning capital needs, plans to renovate its portfolio and raise the necessary revenue to maintain public housing have fallen short.

We must refocus efforts on bringing NYCHA back into a state of good repair, but to do that we must also break the cycle of distrust between NYCHA residents and the City, which is a huge barrier to progress. The less the City and NYCHA deliver for residents, the less they are trusted. The less trust, the less buy-in there is for subsequent plans to help improve living conditions and get NYCHA's portfolio on solid footing.

In order to regain resident trust and make progress on plans to renovate and reposition NYCHA properties, the City should give up some of its power to residents. We must

move past "resident engagement." Why should NYCHA residents "engage" with the City after so many decades of broken promises? The people who live in these buildings, and who have a real stake in seeing their living conditions improved, should be the ones making decisions about the future of NYCHA's portfolio. The process to craft a Request for Proposals and select development partners on NYCHA campuses could be driven by residents. NYCHA already has a pre-qualified list of developers it believes are capable of doing the work - why not give the next step over to residents to interview and select the best choice for their development? This sounds like a radical shift in the power structure, and it is! But it is also a proven method, refined over several decades in England, that can turn skeptical public housing residents into equal partners in the redevelopment process. With the 15 months left in this administration, the City should offer this option to the most entrepreneurial and well-organized NYCHA developments and see what new ideas can flourish when NYCHA residents are given the opportunity and responsibility of real decision-making over the future of their housing.

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## **5 AFFORDABLE HOUSING FOR ESSENTIAL WORKERS.**

In the midst of this unprecedented public health and economic crisis, housing can play a key role in helping spur economic development, create housing stability for low-income New Yorkers, and strengthen our city's infrastructure in the next pandemic.

The City should set aside its lottery system and target scarce affordable housing resources to enable NYC's essential workers to have an affordable, high-quality apartment in the neighborhood of their choice. This would

help the home health aides who have the lowest wages and longest commute times of any profession, the truck drivers and grocery store workers who kept us fed during the scary months of March and April, and many others.

During the pandemic, New Yorkers realized what makes our city function. We must help our essential workers maintain a foothold in the city they have sacrificed so much to keep running amid unprecedented conditions. We all clapped each night at 7 PM; now it is time to actually help our essential workers remain stably housed in the city that needs them more than ever.