



CHPC TESTIMONY: 2018 New York City Charter Revisions

Issue Forum: Community Boards and Land Use

Summary: Potential revisions and reform of the New York City Charter regarding the issues of Community Boards and Land Use in 2018

Appearances: Commissioners Perales, Godsil, Scissura, Carrion, Ho, Clarke, Seecharan, Bragg, Gewolb

I want to thank the members of the NYC Charter Reform Commission for this important discussion and for asking me to speak here today. My name is Jessica Katz, and I am the Executive Director of the Citizens Housing and Planning Council, CHPC. Founded in 1937, CHPC's mission as a civic organization is to develop and advance practical public policies to support the housing stock of the City of New York. We are a council of 90 leading professionals across all aspects of the housing and planning sector.

Prior to joining CHPC in this year, I spent 12 years at the NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development where I held various positions in the Office of Development, but for most of my time in City Government I was responsible for the City's Supportive Housing pipeline to create homes for chronically homeless and disabled New Yorkers throughout New York City's neighborhoods. I am very proud of the community engagement strategies we have built in the supportive housing sector, and believe that it is only by engaging in a robust community process that we have been able to create so many successful supportive housing projects throughout New York City.

I am here today in my capacity as Executive Director of CHPC, eager to engage in a discussion about how to improve the quality of our public discourse and ensure a better decision-making process to guide land use decisions in our complicated, ever-changing city. And on a personal note, as a policy nerd, I am incredibly envious of your roles as members of this Commission- you have the opportunity to reform the circulatory system and the skeleton of New York City Government, and I hope you are all enjoying the process, even as busy as it is.

CHPC has been working over recent years to change the City's approach to land use issues. We want to make it easier for community members to say "Yes" to local land use actions that they support – not simply easier to say "No". That means having a more streamlined review process

that incorporates community feedback, environmental reviews, and input from government agencies in a way that is collaborative instead of adversarial. Rather than simply putting more potential roadblocks in the hands of those who would oppose any change, the City should make adjustments to its land use procedures to make new housing a positive asset for neighborhoods and their existing residents. Community input is a core value of our democracy, but not all community processes are created alike. We must ensure that NYC's land use processes can incorporate both local and citywide needs, can drive the creation of affordable housing rather than act as a deterrent. Community planning, rather than NIMBYism, should rule the day. City Charter reform creates an opportunity to make meaningful change, but it also runs the risk of handing the keys to the city to those that resist the creation of much-needed affordable housing or giving too strong a voice to a vocal few while those most in need are shut out of the process.

In that spirit, we put forth 5 key recommendations:

1. A predictable timeline is critical. The ULURP process currently has a well-defined timeline that is crucial. That should not change, and any discussions of lengthening the process must be balanced against the cost of doing so.
2. The process must find a way to balance citywide needs balanced against neighborhood goals.
3. We need to start by establishing our goals for the land use process: Community input and participation is a value and goal in itself, but NYC has many other planning and development goals. (Creation of affordable housing, returning city-owned land to productive use, neighborhood revitalization, among others).
4. The Department of City Planning must have the resources so they can better process land use actions and provide more robust technical assistance to community boards.
5. We must create a process that gives voice to the voiceless. Currently, the only people who don't have a vote in the ULURP process are those who may someday live in the new housing proposed. For an example that is near and dear to my heart, there are 60,000 homeless people in NYC and they do not (for the most part) attend community board meetings. And yet, it is both our legal and moral responsibility to ensure that their needs are met.

To sum up, I just want to say that the ULURP process as it currently stands is long, technical, and messy. Communities complain their voices are not heard, developers complain that their needs are not being met. The pre-ULURP process is used for productive negotiation and as a stall tactic. In the course of your public hearings, you will hear complaints that the process is too rigid, and at once too open-ended. That there is too much community input, and not enough. So where I started my testimony today with all the reasons why ULURP reform is needed, there will be no perfect solution that satisfies everyone, and it just might be that like any good negotiation, we know we have succeeded when all parties walk away unhappy with the result. It may be that the ULURP process, for all its faults, is simply a reflection of how difficult these land use choices are, and that the controversy is not a reflection of a broken process at all, but of a productive push and pull among stakeholders.

Thank you again for inviting CHPC to be a part of today's discussion, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

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