



CITIZENS UNION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
Testimony to the Council Governmental Operations Committee
On Proposed Community Board Reform
April 30, 2015

Good morning Chair Kallos and members of the Governmental Operations committee. My name is Rachael Fauss, and I am the Director of Public Policy at Citizens Union. Citizens Union is a nonpartisan good government group dedicated to making democracy work for all New Yorkers. We serve as a civic watchdog, combating corruption and fighting for political reform.

Citizens Union last completed an in-depth policy review of the community boards in the context of city charter changes for the 2010 City Charter Revision Commission, issuing a report with a comprehensive examination of numerous issues facing community boards.¹ Subsequent to that review, we have examined other issues such as term limits for community boards. Together, our positions on community board reform seek to strengthen community boards, providing them with additional resources, while also ensuring that there is a more rigorous selection process and open process for appointment of members.

Our positions are as follows:

- 1. Community boards should receive an independent budget allocation** that is not at the discretion of the mayor or council. We believe that they are currently insufficiently funded, and greater resources are essential for community boards to carry out their Charter-mandated responsibilities as an advisor on land use, planning, and budgeting. To this end, community boards should be provided enough funding to be able to hire staff with land use and/or budgetary expertise. The budget for community boards should be linked to that of borough presidents' offices, which should be linked to the City Council's budget (Citizens Union also supports independent budgeting for the Borough Presidents). Community boards in total should receive 65% of the borough presidents' allocation, with each board receiving an equal amount in addition to allocations to cover offices, electricity and heat, which would still be determined through the regular budget process. Sixty-five percent of the FY2015 borough presidents' allocation would have provided the boards with a base of approximately \$265,000 per board, to which would be added additional funds for offices, electricity and heat (which are not included in this formula). The additional funds from the operating formula coupled with a separate allocation for offices, electricity and heat should provide for the hiring of additional expert staff.

¹ See the full report at:

http://www.citizensunion.org/www/cu/site/hosting/Reports/0610CU_Charter_Revision_Report&Recommendations.pdf, with the community boards chapter on pages 37-41.

2. A mechanism should be created that provides an available pool of urban planners independent of the borough presidents' offices that can be accessed by community boards.

This is critical to provide meaningful and informed input on land use decisions and to develop 197-a plans. These urban planners should be connected to one or more boards, thereby establishing relationships with those boards and the larger communities they serve. While housing urban planners with the borough presidents is aligned with their current responsibilities to “establish and maintain a planning office...for the use, development or improvement of land located in the borough” under section 82 of chapter 4 of the City Charter and to “provide training and technical assistance to the members of the community boards” it could become problematic when the borough president may disagree with a community board on a land development issue. Given their distinct roles in ULURP and past instances in which borough presidents have sought to remove community board members who have not aligned their votes with the sentiments of the borough presidents on land use proposals, it is essential that the independence of the community boards, and the urban planners that serve them, be maintained.

Citizens Union recognizes that Intro 732 seeks to provide planning expertise to the community boards and supports its intent, though prefers providing planning services independent of the borough presidents for the reasons outlined above.

3. Reform the process for selecting members to community boards. Community boards are too often plagued by vacancies. To professionalize and open the boards to the communities they serve, **a formal standardized and transparent process should be created for filling community board positions**, as was done by former Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer.

Language should be added to the City Charter that:

- **Requires written applications and interviews of all appointees or reappointees by the borough presidents;**
- **Establishes a deadline of 30 days for filling vacant positions; and**
- **Requires borough presidents to issue an annual report detailing their outreach efforts, whom they notified of the process, methods used and the demographics of those serving on community boards in comparison to the communities served by the boards.**

4. Community board members should be term limited, serving five consecutive two-year terms.

This limit on terms should be phased in prospectively to ensure there is not a mass exodus of institutional knowledge from the boards, while ensuring that representation on boards can keep pace with changing demographics of communities and does not become inaccessible to the communities they serve.

Regarding Intro 585, Citizens Union supports the institution of term limits, though as noted prefers two five-year terms rather than six, and opposes the provision of the bill that exempts from term limits those members appointed before April 1, 2016. We believe that exempting members appointed before April 2016 will unnecessarily delay the intended goals of introducing terms limits – ensuring that boards are better able to reflect the current and

changing dynamics of neighborhoods, while balancing historic perspectives. It is particularly important that implementation not be delayed to ensure that emerging immigrant communities are able to be empowered in their representation. Lastly, we would note that community boards could still create opportunities for former members to remain involved – either through mentoring programs or advisory committees of non-voting members.

Regarding phasing in new members, prefer a staggered approach that will phase in term limits, for example providing in the legislation that those who have currently served 5 terms or more terms could only serve 1 more term; those who have served 4 terms could serve for 3 more terms; those who have served 3 terms could only serve 2 more terms, and so on, until every member who is appointed can only serve a maximum of five terms.

I thank you for the opportunity to present Citizens Union's views on community board reform. I welcome any questions you have.