



**STRENGTHEN COMMUNITY BOARDS, STRENGTHEN COMMUNITIES:
Allow 16- and 17-Year-Olds to Serve on NYC Community Boards**
Testimony to the New York City Council, Committee on Governmental Operations
Monday, June 9th, 2014

Community board members offer a valuable community service. Dedicated volunteers donate their time, energy, experience, and insight to identifying and tackling pressing community issues. The stronger the members, the stronger the boards, the stronger our communities.

Diversifying our boards by expanding membership to include exceptional 16- and 17-year-olds will benefit boards and the communities that they serve. I urge the Council to pass Resolution 115 in support of state legislation to amend the Public Officer's Law and to allow young people and their communities this valuable civic opportunity.

Young people will offer boards new perspectives on local problems. Sixteen and seventeen year olds see their neighborhoods and use its services – schools, businesses, and public spaces – differently than adults do. They can offer new insights on and solutions to entrenched local issues.

The nonprofit with which I work, Generation Citizen, charges middle and high school students with analyzing and tackling relevant school, neighborhood, and city-based problems. Every semester, they are capable of both identifying serious and relevant community concerns and taking strategic and creative action to address them. Our students have mobilized their peers in lobbying for pedestrian safety legislation; they have created school curricula to stem bullying incidents on their campus. When told that their voices are valuable and respected, young people can and do, and will, speak up. And we all stand to benefit from listening to what they have to say.

Young people will publicize community board activities and responsibilities to new audiences. Rather than bemoan lack of youth political participation, let's take advantage of the opportunity to stimulate discussion about local political structures and happenings by empowering young leaders to teach and rally their peers. Youth leaders offer community boards the opportunity to access significant proportions of their communities that they currently don't have an easy entry to influence – young people. Furthermore, habits of political participation are set early. In order to build an informed and involved electorate, we should be promoting civic engagement from the time that young people are in school, learning explicitly about governmental processes and experimenting with their own role in influencing these structures.

For that matter, expanding community board membership offers a unique opportunity to identify and train future civic leaders. Rather than wait for our young people to leave the neighborhoods where they were born and raised to build connections with new communities, at college or around future places of employment, let's solidify these ties while we can. Let's allow our best and brightest the opportunity to



give back to the communities which have raised them, and let's support them in building their civic competencies so that they are successful leaders for us now and into the future.

Lastly, youth participation will remain optional for boards. Boards who do not wish to welcome youth to their ranks can continue to not do so; no part of this resolution or its accompanying state legislation forces any community board to change their structures or membership. Certain boards' reticence, however, should not prevent other boards from taking this important step in valuing youth voice and in diversifying their representation. There is no reason to unilaterally deprive boards of this opportunity.

I urge you to vote yes on Resolution 115. Let community board membership be the decision of the community – and for those who are willing, let young people have a voice at the table.

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