



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 15, 2010**

Good afternoon, Chairman Brewer and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the community board portion of the 2011 Executive Budget.

The City Charter mandates community boards to serve the constituents of this City in a variety of capacities. In addition to making recommendations in the annual budget process, these duties include ensuring efficient delivery of City services, reviewing land use proposals and capital projects, and ensuring neighborhood access to community agencies and facilities. Upon assessing the needs and resources of their constituents, the boards consult and advise the Mayor, City agencies, the Borough President, and City Council on the aforementioned issues. Finally, as representatives of local communities, the community boards work to ensure that City spending improves the quality of life for residents and workers in their districts.

Since their inception, community boards have consistently been asked to adapt their mission in order to address the needs of the city. Each time they have risen to the challenge. When Mayor Wagner took his “Community Planning Council” concept citywide in 1963, the boards were envisioned as town halls for community based planning, equipped with a full-time professional urban planner.

Unfortunately, funding cuts and budget restrictions have made it necessary to put this vision on hold. Following the Charter revision in 1975, community boards were asked to fill in for other agencies that were no longer able to meet their service delivery mandates due to city funding cuts. In the thirty plus years since, community boards have set aside their original role as community planning councils in the interest of fulfilling the city’s service delivery needs.

Times have changed. Neighborhood service delivery is no longer our dominant challenge: Mayor Bloomberg has launched 311 and elected officials on the federal, state and local levels offer full-time constituent services. We no longer need community boards to report back to us on potholes. Now we need community boards to focus on coordinating service delivery where bureaucracy has created systems too complex to meet our needs.

We have finally reached a time when community boards can fulfill their charter mandated vision. It is time we put the “planning” back into community boards. It is time that we rethink the role of the boards.

Under the direction of my land use department, I created the Manhattan Borough President's Community Planning Fellowship, a program which places outstanding second-year graduate urban planning students at each Manhattan community board, making their expertise available to each board for an entire academic year. This enhances the ability of community boards to evaluate development proposals and at the same time imparts an appreciation for local government and community development to the next generation of urban planners.

Our experiment has yielded fantastic results. Over the past four years, our planning fellows have worked with community boards to create a community-based zoning proposal for the East Village within Community Board 3; analyzed residential conversion of Class B office space in Community Board 5; and helped Community Board 10 in Central Harlem to update their 197-A proposal.

The success of this program demonstrates what community boards can do with more meaningful resources. I am thrilled to announce that Mayor Bloomberg and CUNY have committed to working with my office to expand this program citywide and I look forward to working with them to bring this final piece of the puzzle to every community board in the city.

However, as community boards are poised to contribute to the planning of New York City as never before, they face budget cuts that would cripple their ability to do so. The Mayor's January 2011 Financial Plan includes a reduction of \$36,593 per board. This reduction leaves each board's proposed total budget at \$160,437 without council restoration. While consistent with what the Mayor's PEG asked of many other agencies, the effect will be disproportionate due to the small size and inherently inelastic nature of the community board budgets. If the Mayor's Contingency Budget to respond to withheld State funds is realized, the boards could be asked to absorb a whopping **nine** percent reduction to their already depleted budgets

This means that community boards will likely have to eliminate staff positions or services vital to their charter mandate, such as reviewing applications, coordinating service delivery between agencies, notifying the public of meetings and providing translation services. The elimination of just one staff person in an office with a total of four employees would represent a **25 percent** decrease in capacity, while responsibilities are increasing and the stakes for community participation are higher than ever. Coupled with the cuts proposed to other agencies, a reduction of these crucial services will actually cost the city more in the long-term.

Once again, community boards are being asked to do more with less. Tough economic times necessitate smarter choices. Funding an agency that reduces the workload for other agencies, promotes community involvement, and increases the city's overall efficiency is a smart choice. In fact, it makes community boards the best value we have in city government.

Let's do the right thing and fund community boards adequately this year so they can continue to fight for our neighborhoods. I encourage the committee to recommend that community boards be spared a cut in their budget. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today.