



OFFICE OF THE BROOKLYN BOROUGH PRESIDENT

ANTONIO REYNOSO

Brooklyn Borough President

June 7, 2022

Dear Speaker Adams,

As we continue to deal with—and look beyond—the COVID-19 pandemic, our city faces an uphill road to recovery. As a former member of the City Council’s Budget Negotiating Team, I know that the budget process can be challenging. Yet it is arguably the most important responsibility the Council has, and I appreciate the thoughtful way this Council has approached this year’s hearings and negotiations under your leadership.

As we approach the final negotiations, I wanted to take a moment to share my priorities for this budget, which will help ensure a just recovery for all, both in the great Borough of Brooklyn and citywide.

Discretionary funding for seniors: The Council has a long history of supporting Borough Presidents in serving our boroughs. Specifically, in FY 2022, the Council restored \$1.13m in discretionary funding for the BPs to allocate for senior programs through DFTA. This funding allowed my predecessor to support 26 organizations that provide seniors with meals, transportation, home care, housing assistance, senior center programming, and other services. The pandemic has been especially difficult on our seniors, who have experienced isolation, lack of access to health care, food insecurity, and other economic instability. Especially given that the Mayor’s budget proposes cuts to our offices’ general discretionary funding, I encourage the Council to renew this initiative so that seniors in all five boroughs can have continued access to these vital services.

Community Boards: The pandemic has also not been easy on our city’s community boards, and I was disappointed that the Council did not put their needs on the agenda for either the preliminary or executive budget hearing. The boards are a critical first point of contact between the public and City government, and even before the pandemic, they were struggling to maintain their basic Charter-mandated functions. Their meager budget allocation only provides for a minimal number of staff lines, and leaves little room for competitive salaries, making recruitment and retention of professional staff difficult. Inability to fill vacancies has a major impact on an office with only a handful of staff. Without baselined funding, district managers have difficulty planning for staff expansion long-term, not knowing if the lines will be renewed the next year.

The technology challenges caused by the pandemic have been especially difficult, as boards were forced to go fully virtual, and are now struggling to comply with a new hybrid meeting policy. Yet the boards have received no financial support for this process, and the technology available

and the expertise required to use that technology varies widely from board to board. What's worse, DOITT is tasked with assisting all 59 boards with their technology needs, yet the agency only had one staff member dedicated to this, and he left months ago and has not been replaced. One District Manager reported that DOITT just responded last week to a request made in February. This is unacceptable.

As the boards shift to hybrid meetings, board staff must find and secure compliant in-person meeting space with no support from DCAS. This was already a challenge before the pandemic, and now that boards have been away from their previous meeting spaces for over two years, even fewer spaces are available to meet their needs (for example, schools or hospitals may no longer host public meetings). Additionally, the boards struggle to make their meetings and information available and accessible to people without regular internet access or fluency in English. These constituents shouldn't be left out of the democratic process. Community boards need funding for non-digital communication such as flyers and mailers, as well as translation services for those materials, for their websites, and for their meetings.

These are all symptoms of the larger issue —that there is no one entity with a mandate to provide comprehensive, ongoing support for the community boards. The 2018 Charter revision tasked the new Civic Engagement Commission with providing the boards with access to professional planning expertise, translation resources, and training in land use, technology, and meeting procedures. However, the CEC's mandate is limited, and so far implementation has been inconsistent. For example, the CEC is developing a consultant program to provide the boards with urban planning resources but has given no indication of how the boards will afford these consultants with their limited budgets.

With a lack of clarity in the Charter about roles and responsibilities for assisting the boards generally, Borough Presidents have often stepped up to provide needed support, even though our offices are not funded to do so. However, this support has not been consistent across the boroughs, leaving many of the boards struggling with everything from the daily tasks of running their offices, to providing constituent services, to ensuring that their volunteer members get the training they need to execute their roles successfully.

In FY 2019, the Council included a \$2.5m funding enhancement for community boards, expanding each of the city's 59 boards' budget by \$42,500. An expansion of this type would make a huge difference for boards this year, and would be even more impactful if baselined. More broadly, I am asking the Council to advocate for increased funding for the CEC to expand its mandate to provide community boards with support for operations, technology, human resources/EEO, technical assistance, compliance, and any other necessary services.

Other priorities: I also want to take this opportunity to highlight a few budget proposals that I support and would like to see Council advocate for as budget negotiations continue:

- **\$22m for improved litter basket service, \$4.9m for rat mitigation programs, and restoration and expansion of curbside composting programs** to ensure that our city's streets are clean and that we are making progress toward sending zero waste to landfill.

- **\$8.7m to expand geriatric mental health services to all 108 older adult centers, \$30m for a seamless transition for recovery meals, and \$60m for a Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) for human service providers** to ensure that our seniors and those who work with them receive what they need as we come out of the pandemic.
- **\$25m for implementation of Our City, Our Vote, \$27m in baselined spending on adult literacy programs, and \$4m to expand language access through a Community Interpreter Bank and worker-owned co-ops** to support our immigrant and language-isolated communities.
- **\$10m for Care for All, and an enhancement to the Community Schools program**, to ensure that our young people are cared for both before and during their school years.
- **Continued support for affordable housing and tenant services, including increased capital funding for HPD and NYCHA** (the increase currently proposed is not nearly enough to meet the extreme need), **restoration of affordable housing access and tenant support services, and support for Right to Counsel**. There is a crisis facing our renters and the City must step in to provide relief.
- **\$3.1b to implement the City's Streets Plan** to ensure a connected bicycle network, new protected bus lanes, and more public pedestrian space to make our streets safer and end dependence on cars.
- **1% of the City's budget** allocated for improvements to our Parks and open spaces.
- **\$100m to support Visionary Investment in Building the NYC Economy (VIBE)**, including funding for the Cultural Institutions Group, DCLA, cultural groups led by people of color, and the City Artist Corps.
- **\$62m in new operating funds for CUNY** to support much-needed programs such as expanding child-care centers, providing mental health counselors, and making critical capital repairs.

Thank you for your attention to these important issues. I look forward to continued collaboration with you and your team.

Sincerely,



Antonio Reynoso
Brooklyn Borough President