

Testimony of Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum for City Council Hearing on Governmental Operations for Fiscal Year 2008

Thank you, Chair Felder, for holding this important hearing.

With experts predicting that New York City's population will grow by one million within the next twenty years, the act of planning for the future has taken on a note of urgency. The recent flurry of council hearings on planning for 2030 demonstrates our growing commitment to looking ahead. We have become a city that understands the value of long-term planning. As we move forward with a comprehensive citywide plan, we must also recognize the importance of local, community-based planning.

Since the 1960s, New York City's Community Boards have represented the interests of community residents whose neighborhoods are undergoing redevelopment. Community Boards are the first level of government responsible for publicly reviewing building projects through the city's Uniform Land Use Review Procedure. Their annual *Statements of District Needs* help agencies deliver government services where they're needed most. Their role in reviewing applications for liquor licenses and street fairs gives communities an opportunity to shape their own character. Yet when it comes to creating the kinds of multi-year comprehensive plans that can help guide these month-by-month decisions, Community Boards have had no choice but to take a back seat to the Department of City Planning.

For more than thirty years, Community Boards have had the authority to develop their own large-scale, long-term plans. Yet as of today, only eight of these "197-a" plans have been written and approved for seven of the City's 59 Community Districts. It's no wonder: there are a range of barriers to creating a 197-a plan including lack of time, lack of expertise, and lack of funding. According to a report by the Municipal Art Society, in 2005, none of the Community Boards had a full-time urban planner on staff to oversee the creation of a 197-a plan. This week, my office reached out to the City's 59 Community Boards and learned that since 2005, only one Board has managed to hire a planner—and doing so meant that it could not afford to hire another much-needed staffer. Community Boards that have successfully seen a plan through to completion have had to rely on costly experts hired from for-profit firms and non-profit institutes. Interns from local graduate schools and staffers in at least one Borough President's Office have helped to fill in the gaps, but they can hardly make up for a full-time planner with a deep understanding of the community.

The Municipal Art Society claims that the process of putting together a 197-a plan can cost a Community Board from \$50,000 to \$250,000, depending on how ambitious the plan is. The 2008 preliminary budget calls for an average allowance of about \$238,000 per Community Board. With that kind of funding, it's unlikely that many—if *any*—new plans will be launched next year. This puts communities up for redevelopment at a distinct disadvantage: while 197-a plans are not, by themselves, enforceable, they can be a powerful tool for guiding Community Board policies that *are* enforceable. The priorities spelled out in a 197-a plan can lead a Community Board to apply for permanent

changes to the local zoning map through ULURP. A plan can also help a Community Board develop thoughtful and strategic long-term requests for municipal services through their annual statement of needs.

The process of developing a plan is valuable in and of itself. Through public deliberation, debate, collaboration, and consensus-building, the act of drafting a comprehensive plan creates what sociologists call “social capital.” Put simply, community *planning* is a vital part of community *building*. With a plan in hand, communities strengthened by the process of working together, can go on to work with developers to ensure that neighborhood growth benefits local residents.

The citywide plan for 2030 is set to be released within a few weeks. Our enthusiasm for planning should not end there. We must ensure that our Community Boards have access to the resources that will allow all communities to plan for their futures. To that end, I urge you to make a meaningful investment in community-based planning in the 2008 budget. I look forward to working with the Council on this important issue.

Thank you.