

July 25, 2002

Hon. Robert McGuire , Chair
New York City Charter Revision Commission
2 Lafayette Street -14th Floor
New York, New York 10007

Dear Chairman McGuire:

Let me begin by thanking you for this opportunity to comment on this important issue. The Queens Civic Congress represents 100 civic and community associations throughout all of Queens.

A government has the right to govern only when it has the confidence of its citizens. We do not have any confidence in a commission formed solely to facilitate the Mayor's wish to place so-called non-partisan elections and to remove the public advocate from the line of succession to the mayor. The Queens Civic Congress joins in the statement issued July 11 by other citywide good government groups that calls on the Mayor to: allow the public enough time and opportunity to have a say; give the charter commission independence; let the commission have its own staff; and pledge not to use his personal fortune to promote the charter proposals on the ballot. We also join in the statement today by eight leading civic and good government groups recommending no ballot proposals for this November.

Rather than a focus on the utility of the Public Advocate – the essence of the proposal to change the line of succession if a vacancy occurs in the office of the Mayor – and non-partisan elections, it makes sense to work to revise the Charter in way that it works not so much for the political needs of some elites, but to make the City an attractive place to live for all New Yorkers. Achieve this end by a look instead at how to structure the City to make decisions on allocating its resources and services.

The process of revising the Charter, the New York City's constitution, is a very serious matter which goes to the heart of our democracy. The 1989 Charter Revision seriously eroded the power of the communities. The political result was a secession movement in two boroughs. Though not the charge of this commission, please remain mindful that we view any attempt by any charter revision commission to further centralize power or decision making especially in the area of land use, ULURP, as a call to reconsider secession.

That commission, to its credit, spent two years preparing its proposals and had numerous public debates over a nine-month period which provided opportunities to incorporate revisions. This commission has barely longer than a month during the summer to discuss these serious matters.

Therefore, we call on the mayor to immediately dissolve this commission because first there exists no demonstrable need for a commission for the purpose of placing two mayoral musings on the ballot this fall and second there exists insufficient time for a serious public debate on either. In the alternative, vote at your first meeting to make no recommendations for the 2002 elections.

A look at the Queens Civic Congress platform available on our website, offers many concrete proposals for reform, all proposals much more worthy of the commission's consideration. Neither mayoral musing made the cut (not does anyone recall their consideration) in any of the three platforms advanced by the Congress since our founding in 1997, nor were these part of the platforms of our predecessor, the Federation of Civic Councils of the Borough of Queens. We urge the commission to review our platform and remain available to meet the Commission and its staff to discuss these sound reforms

Rather than focus on the mayor's musings, New Yorkers need this commission to look at intelligent policies which could and should be embodied in the City Charter. New York City's tax policies wrongly subsidize extra illegal occupancies which crowd some schools in our neighborhoods. The City similarly fails to collect the correct taxes from the illegal commercial uses of these homes. Citywide, these failures cost taxpayers over one billion dollars. This could be applied to the City's structural deficit. Alternatively, this amount could be dedicated to build affordable housing to help relieve the demands that help fuel illegal development.

This represents an example of the need to improve the Charter to ensure the delivery of appropriate municipal services where the need exists. Let's use this time to re-think how New York City composes its budget, allocates its resources and makes decisions on service delivery.

Each year we and other community groups argue during the annual budget deliberations that the City needs to direct resources to meet community needs. Recognize New York City as a region; recognize that the boroughs and neighborhoods offer more effective entities for making decisions on where many services ought to go. Set up a mechanism that devolves resource and service delivery to the appropriate borough or local level.

Seize this otherwise opportunity at Charter Revision to meaningfully involve communities in the delivery of services. Community Boards continually note their priorities which often vary. The budget never reflects the need to allocate resources to reflect different neighborhood priorities.

Provide a mechanism that directs City resources to address community needs such as precinct staffing, code enforcement, tree pruning/ removal, traffic studies and signal installation, and programs for youth and seniors.

Explore regional models for funding agencies. More decisions and resources should be devolved to the borough and local level. This requires a comprehensive review on the strengthening the role of Community Boards and the Borough Presidents and empowering these institutions with the resources to carry out their responsibilities under the City Charter. The office of Borough President, as an institution, remains inextricably bound to the future role of the boroughs as discrete entities, each one with its unique identity: a guarantee in the compact that united the five boroughs 104 years ago. We urge a greater role for the borough presidents in local land use planning for their boroughs, allocation of agency resources within the boroughs, overseeing local implementation of the capital budget and greater oversight of the delivery of city services in their boroughs. Provide the Borough Presidents and the Public Advocate with the resources to empower each to carry out their charter functions and help New York City weather the current fiscal crisis; use the IBO/OMB analogy to assure the offices adequate funding.

Some communities require more (or less) of a service than others. A city-wide approach rarely works. As long as the basic package gets reasonably and fairly divided, we should get beyond a discussion. Instead of a pie, think of a package of several smaller slices, cut up differently but when placed on each person's plate, the amount of dessert is about the same.

In addition to enhancing the roles of the Borough Presidents and the Public Advocate, the Queens Civic Congress recommends broadening public review of major land use decisions. The Queens Civic Congress land use platform includes providing more public review, with City Council oversight, of major residential, commercial, industrial and public developments; borough-based planning and zoning offices; requiring public review of public agencies' projects and providing for Council oversight of all decisions by the City Planning Commission and the Board of Standards and Appeals.

Give New York City, its boroughs and communities a structure which allows us to compete with the localities to our east, west and north for residents. No one will make a decision on whether to stay or move to New York City based on whether we have a Public Advocate or Deputy Mayor succeed a Mayor unable to complete her or his term , or whether we select our public officials in a so-called non-partisan election. People do make decisions based on the level of services and how attractive a neighborhood compares to other locales. Demonstrate you care about our City; focus on what can make this City work. In fact, the Public Advocate and the Borough Presidents which some pundits and editorial board want on the butcher block represent entities which make even more sense in a city with a Charter revised to devolve decision making to the most local level sensible and practicable.

Sincerely,

Queens Civic Congress

By: Patricia Dolan
Executive Vice President

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