



**Suggested Changes to the New York City Charter  
Submitted to the 2005 Charter Revision Commission  
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Prepared by the Municipal Art Society Planning Center  
On behalf of the Community-Based Planning Task Force

The 1989 Charter revision included language intended to clarify Section 197-a, thereby making it easier for communities to create neighborhood plans. Subsequently, seven neighborhood-based 197-a plans have been adopted by the city, even though there are 59 community boards citywide.<sup>1</sup> The obstacles to completion and implementation of neighborhood plans that effectively represent community visions are numerous.

Changes to the New York City Charter could begin to enable more communities to plan effectively for their own neighborhoods, and for the recommendations of new and existing 197-a plans to be implemented. As requested, the Community-Based Planning Task Force offers the following suggestions for revisions to the Charter that will more fully enable democratic participation in land use planning and decision-making. Our suggestions focus on three areas: diversifying community boards; providing professional planning assistance to community boards; and linking neighborhood plans to comprehensive citywide plans.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bronx CB6 (1992); Manhattan CB4 (1996); Brooklyn CB6 (1996); Manhattan CB6 (1997); Brooklyn CB1 (Williamsburg Waterfront Plan and the Greenpoint Plan, 2002); and Bronx CB8 (2003).

<sup>2</sup> For a full discussion of these concepts, see *Livable Neighborhoods for a Livable City: Policy Recommendations to Strengthen Community-Based Planning in New York City*.

**1) Give the Public Advocate an oversight role in the community board appointment process and responsibility for a public awareness-raising campaign to promote community board membership.**

As it now stands, community boards are the only officially recognized structure for public participation in neighborhood planning for everything from the city budget to 197-a planning. There are no checks and balances laid out in the Charter to ensure that community boards are as diverse as the populations they represent. Despite the rapid influx of new immigrants into many communities, even significant changes in the composition of a district's population are not subject to regular reports that feed back into the appointment process. Each of the five boroughs of New York City has a different application form for new potential community board members, and no city agency or citywide elected official is responsible for tracking board membership demographics. We need more accountability to ensure fully democratic participation.

There are no provisions in the Charter mandating the city to promote participation in community boards. The percentage of New Yorkers who do not know that community boards exist is probably greater than the percentage of New Yorkers who do. The Public Advocate can be given a role in the Charter to devise and conduct a citywide public outreach plan that increases the potential for a diverse pool of applicants for all community boards.

**2) Give community boards increased training, technical resources, and planning expertise.**

The Charter specifies that community boards must make plans for their districts, but there are no provisions enabling them to take on this complex task. The average community district has a population of over 100,000, which makes it comparable in size to the cities of Bridgeport, New Haven or Waterbury, Connecticut or Elizabeth, New Jersey or Albany, New York—all of which have hundreds of employees and budgets in the millions to provide services. All responsibilities of the board are carried out by a very small staff typically consisting of the district manager and two administrative assistants. Any extra personnel, such as planning expertise, must be paid for out of the board's approximate \$200,000 budget. Since 1975, however, boards have also been given the right to develop 197-a plans. This has moved them from a reactive role to a more proactive role, requiring different skills and additional resources that have not been matched by additional staff or funding. Even though the Charter authorizes community boards to hire

planners, no community board currently employs a full-time planner. As it now stands, community board members receive just a few hours' training, and only when they are first appointed. The intention of the Charter for communities to have a proactive role in planning for their districts is compromised by the fact that the boards frequently must rely on the professionals employed by city agencies, other governmental agencies and authorities, and developers for technical advice and interpretation, even when those agencies and developers are interested parties in an action.

Effective public participation in the land use review processes that govern development decisions is undermined by the absence of planning expertise, data and resources. Community boards, as part of their Charter-specified obligations, must evaluate Uniform Land Use Review Procedure application, Board of Standards and Appeals variance requests, landmark designation requests, and State Liquor Authority license requests. These decisions have serious implications that will impact the city for the next 20 to 50 years, yet community boards are not fully-equipped to participate in these decisions due to the absence of independent planning and urban design input.

**3) The Charter should include a provision mandating the creation of a regularly-updated comprehensive citywide plan that uses community-based plans as building blocks.**

197-a planning has not been effective in assuring that development meets neighborhood needs; nor has it resulted in the consensus needed to ensure that development proceeds in a timely fashion. Citywide goals need to be balanced with neighborhood goals; the method by which to achieve this balance is an open, iterative process between city government and communities, set out in a clearly defined process.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> New York can draw on the experiences of a host of other municipalities in the U.S. to formulate new policy. The cities that have incorporated community-based planning into the official planning and budget framework—Seattle, Minneapolis, Houston, Baltimore, and Rochester, for example—generally begin with a set of guiding principles based on the concept that livable neighborhoods make a livable city. There is a commitment to broad community participation, development of collaborative partnerships, and strengthening of local capacities. Each city has a unique process but there are underlying similarities: a link between neighborhood plans and a comprehensive city plan; explicit support from and partnership with city government; a clearly defined planning process; benchmarks and predictability of outcome; commitment to implementation.

The Planning Center and the Community-Based Planning Task Force are eager to work with the Commission as it contemplates ways to rework the city's Charter for the twenty-first century.  
Thank you.