



CITY OF NEW YORK  
**MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR**  
330 West 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, 26<sup>th</sup> floor New York, NY 10036  
tel: 212-736-4536 fax: 212-947-9512  
[www.nyc.gov/mcb4.org](http://www.nyc.gov/mcb4.org)

**BURT LAZARIN**  
Chair

**JESSE R. BODINE**  
District Manager

September 6, 2018

Mr. Cesar Perales  
Chair  
New York City Charter Revision Commission  
1 Centre Street  
New York, New York 10007

**Re: Charter Revision Proposals Affecting Community Boards**

Dear Mr. Perales:

Manhattan Community Board 4 (“MCB4”) strongly believes your ballot proposals relating to the functioning of Community Boards were made without a fundamental understanding of how Community Boards work and will not accomplish the stated goals of the Commission. The members of MCB4 believe these ballot proposals could weaken the role of local Community Boards by reducing the level of effective input from community members. MCB4 voted nearly unanimously at its September 5, 2018 Full Board meeting, with 32 members voting in favor, 1 members voting against, 0 members abstaining, and 0 members voting present not eligible to approve this letter.

MCB4’s concerns echo those raised by the Borough Presidents of Manhattan, the Bronx, Queens and Staten Island in their joint letter to you dated August 21, 2018, and by fellow Manhattan Community Boards in their recent resolutions submitted to the Commission. When the people most involved in the functioning of Community Boards - the Boards themselves and the Borough Presidents who oversee each Board question the approach of the Commission, it would have behooved the Commission NOT to push ahead with placing these measures in their current form on the November 6<sup>th</sup> Ballot, but instead to take a step back and rethink its approach. While the Mayor charged the Commission with developing proposals for this year’s ballot, MCB4 believes the Mayor’s approach was hasty, requires further vetting, and again may result in unintended consequences that will weaken the community board system and undermine the very goals advanced by the Commission. This cannot be what was intended, or what the Commission wants as its legacy.

Specifically, MCB4 believes the Commission may not be aware of the impact the institution of term limits will have on Community Boards’ ability to operate. The

knowledge necessary to inform a Community Board's decisions or even those of a committee cannot be gained overnight and cannot be done alone. Effective board leadership is built on the experience of chairing a committee, the knowledge of the City's budgeting process and its land use review system, and the ability to recognize and utilize the accumulated years of skills and municipal intelligence shared by all members of the board. Board Members' abilities are achieved over time, whether they ascend to a leadership role or continue as committee members. For a group of unpaid volunteers, this takes a number of terms.

MCB4 works so well because it relies on the institutional knowledge of its long term members who stay on as either committee co-chairs or committee members and help guide new members who are interested in increasingly more responsibility as they develop seniority. MCB4 currently has a number of long standing members, including four former Board Chairs who are still serving.

The role of Community Board Chair would be more difficult without experienced resources on which to rely upon. Developing a pipeline of future leaders takes time. Typically, members serve for at least a year, if not a full term, before chairing a committee. From there, if they are interested, they run for the Second Vice Chair position and then for First Vice Chair. Under the current proposal, a Community Board member will be term-limited out before they could gain the experience necessary.

For example, over the last 20 years there were two very complex special districts created in CD4: (1) the West Chelsea Special District and (2) the Hudson Yards Special District, both finalized in 2005. Both took several years of intense discussions and included unique zoning regulations. The result of these rezonings are coming to fruition now and MCB4 and the community are fortunate to still have several members who participated in the creation of these districts and who understand their purpose as well as the specific zoning regulations. These long-term members are absolutely essential as mentors to CB4 members who were appointed after 2005.

MCB4 shares the Commission's stated goal of having Community Boards be representative of the communities they serve. However, forced attrition due to term limits is a dubious method to achieve this goal and will hurt the neighborhoods served by the Boards. Moreover, regular turnover on Community Boards already moves us towards the diversity the Commission seeks. Over the last five years, nearly 24 new members have been appointed to MCB4. This represents an average annual turnover of nearly 10% and almost 50% turnover over five years. In addition, MCB4's Bylaws require yearly elections to allow for the opportunity for the rotation of board leadership. If the proposed term limits are put into effect, after the longest serving members are replaced and the membership of a Community Board stabilizes, attrition due to term limits will not achieve a higher percentage of new members annually. Instead, the Borough Presidents can be charged with maintaining diversity on Community Boards through the selection process, without any reference to term limits.

In short, the loss of institutional knowledge will result in board members not having access to the most effective tools as they try to better their neighborhoods. This will only further destabilize the relationship the Community Boards have with their future elected representatives, the private sector, and most importantly their neighborhoods. These groups will lose a reliable source of fine grained knowledge and community consensus.

We are also concerned about the support that Community Boards will receive. Currently, when expert advice is needed from outside sources, Community Boards coordinate this through the respective Borough President's offices. Under the Commission's proposals, Community Boards would rely on the newly-formed Civic Engagement Commission for such advice. This simply serves to insert the Mayor into the Community Board process. It diminishes the role of the Borough Presidents by taking control away from them, it erodes the current working relationships between the Borough President and the Community Boards, and it attenuates the power of the neighborhood viewpoint represented in the Community Boards.

MCB4, and here reminding you the vote approving this letter was nearly unanimous, urges you and the Commission to reconsider your proposal to place on the November ballot these changes to the operation of Community Boards. We believe your process was faulty and you need to engage in a more thorough review of how Community Boards function and the consequences of any proposals you may make.

Sincerely,



Burt Lazarin  
Chair  
Manhattan Community Board 4

cc: Hon. Corey Johnson, Speaker, City Council  
Hon. Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Borough President