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June 7, 2021

Hon. Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator for New York
780 Third Avenue, Suite 2601
New York, NY 10017

Hon. Jerry Nadler
United States Congress
201 Varick Street, #669
New York, NY 10014

Hon. Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator for New York
780 Third Avenue, Suite 2301
New York, NY 10017

Hon. Carolyn Maloney
United States Congress
1651 Third Avenue, Suite 311
New York, NY 10128

Re: Reconnecting Communities Act for the Lincoln Tunnel Expressway / Dyer Avenue

Dear Senators and Congressmembers,

Manhattan Community Board 4 (MCB4) applauds the Reconnecting Communities Act, a legislation Senators Gillibrand and Schumer introduced as a companion to the upcoming federal infrastructure bill. We want to bring to your attention the Lincoln Tunnel Expressway/Dyer Avenue, a textbook example of “the disruptive construction of highways” in our district. At its June 2nd Full Board meeting and by a vote of 44 in favor, 0 opposed, 2 abstaining, and 0 present but not eligible to vote, MCB4 requests to meet with your office to discuss how the eligibility requirements are drafted, to ensure a Dyer Avenue project is eligible for funding.

The Reconnecting Communities Act¹ will address the legacy of highway construction built through communities, especially through low-income communities and communities of color, that divided neighborhoods and erected barriers to mobility and opportunity. This new grant program would fund planning and construction of projects to remove or retrofit infrastructure

¹ https://www.epw.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/9/a/9ab45318-25cb-4cb8-9b4e-7e510179bb6f/E406CCBDDE680E6224E68797407D9120.reconnecting-communities-act-one-pager.pdf

barriers such as highway overpasses and depressed highways. This legislation establishes a grant program at the Department of Transportation to help communities identify and remove or remediate infrastructural barriers that create obstacles to mobility or economic development, or expose the community to air pollution or other health and safety risks. The New York Times recently illustrated that such a need exists nationally².

Our working-class community of immigrants was ripped apart in the 1930-1970s by Robert Moses' construction of the Lincoln Tunnel. Between 1840 and 1906, a dense network of tenements occupied the Hell's Kitchen South area. In 1938, through eminent domain by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (PANYNJ) as part of the Lincoln Tunnel Project, blocks in Hell's Kitchen South (HKS) from West 30th to West 42nd Streets between Ninth and Tenth Avenues were cut in half to accommodate Dyer Avenue from West 33rd Street to West 42nd Street. This new highway, at grade and below grade, was intended to funnel traffic to and from the Lincoln Tunnel and connect to the Long Island Expressway (I-495) by the never built 30th Street Mid-Manhattan Expressway.

Block after block of tenement buildings, churches, and community institutions were demolished. In the 1950s and 1970s, more buildings were demolished to accommodate access to a third tube of the Lincoln Tunnel. The Port Authority Bus Terminal (PABT) and its ramps required the demolition of over 300 tenement buildings. Ramps and new roads to the Lincoln Tunnel entrances, constructed in 1938, 1957, and in the mid-1970s, displaced a vibrant low-income community and left a deep tear – both physical and social – in the HKS neighborhood. The jarring disruption of the neighborhood fabric caused by these infrastructure projects is evident today. Ramps, overpasses and underpasses are a dominant characteristic of the area. Not surprisingly, our community experiences the third worst air quality in New York City.

The community's efforts to address this situation started long ago: the 2005 Hudson Yards rezoning included the greening of this area to be financed by developers in exchange for height bonuses. This did not result in any new park. A very small parcel, the "Canoe," was developed as a green space by the City. In 2013, the community again made plans for converting another small segment of Dyer Avenue, but this was never implemented. In 2017, a newly formed Business Improvement District, Hudson Yards Hell's Kitchen Alliance, commissioned a streetscape study³ to evaluate the costs of building a park over the at-grade portions of Dyer Avenue.

In 2019, the Hell's Kitchen South Coalition (HKSC), made up of residents and stakeholders created a plan⁴ to address the serious challenges faced by the community of Hell's Kitchen South related to the Lincoln Tunnel:

² <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/05/27/climate/us-cities-highway-removal.html>

³ <https://www.hykalliance.org/about-the-bid#data-reports>

⁴ <https://www.hkscnyc.org>

- Third worst air quality of the City's 59 Community Districts due to harmful emissions from intense vehicular activity
- Unsafe pedestrian conditions related to high traffic volumes and complex infrastructure
- Lack of public green space; the area's open space ratio (acres per residents) is below the City's goal; and
- A residential core fractured by transportation infrastructure

There are 14 access points to the Lincoln Tunnel in the area. A large portion of Dyer Avenue is a complex system of below grade roadways that connect the adjacent street grid and the Lincoln Tunnel vehicular tubes, generally resulting in open-air cuts.

Similar to the Cross Bronx expressway, this infrastructure bifurcated the area through the disruption of the street grid, hindering the movement of people. Pedestrian travel from east to west is characterized by dark, desolate sidewalks with walls along the street edges. Many street crossings are nearly impassable. The highway design was extended to Ninth Avenue, with the installation of highway-type signs designed to be read at 50mph, and wide-angle turning corners to facilitate high speed.

Manhattan Community District 4 (MCD4) suffers from a serious deficit of parks and public green space. Only two percent of this district's land area is used for public parks, open space or recreation; only three other community districts have a lower percent of land area for these uses.

The current community plan calls for building platforms over the portions of the expressway and Dyer Avenue that are below grade to reclaim that space and re-unify the bifurcated halves of the neighborhood. Inter-connected parks would be created by decking over underpasses and greening those and others at-grade areas. Pedestrian circulation would be vastly improved and the footprint of vehicular traffic would be reduced. Manhattan Community Board 4 voted to support⁵ this plan which has been used in discussions with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey who owns Dyer Avenue.

While some of the platforms will be provided as part of the Port Authority Bus Terminal replacement project, a large swath is located outside of the project area. Should we receive a grant for design and construction under the Act, we would partner with PANYNJ to install platforms and build a park system to properly reconnect the two halves of the community.

We would be very grateful to meet with your offices at the earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

⁵ <https://cbmanhattan.cityofnewyork.us/cb4/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2020/02/02-CHKLU-Letter-to-HKSC-re-Neighborhood-Plan-1.pdf>



Lowell D. Kern
Chair
Manhattan Community Board 4



Jean-Daniel Noland
Chair
Clinton/Hell's Kitchen Land Use Committee



Christine Berthet
Co-chair
Transportation Planning Committee



Dale Corvino
Co-chair
Transportation Planning Committee

Enclosure: Current and proposed

cc: Port Authority of New York & New Jersey
Ed Pincar, Manhattan Borough Commissioner, DOT



Figure 2 - current



Figure 1- proposed