



CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR

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December 13th, 2017

Julie Menin
Commissioner
Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment
1697 Broadway, 6th floor
New York, New York 10019

Manhattan Community Board 4 ("MCB4") was grateful to have Carla Hoke-Miller, of the Mayor's Office of Media, present at the Arts, Culture, Education, and Street Life Committee (ACES) on Monday, November 6, 2017. She informed its members that the Mayor's Office on Media and Entertainment ("MOME")'s plan to prepare an RFP which would commission a survey accurately detailing the social, economic, and cultural impacts that independent theater have on the City of New York. MCB4, at its December 6th Full Board meeting, voted to approve the following set of recommendations with a vote of 44 in favor, 0 opposed, and 1 present but not eligible to vote.

MCB4 applauds this effort and believes the information gained will be useful for our own advocacy efforts on behalf of the theater/cultural community, most of which resides in the confines of Manhattan Community District 4 ("MCD4").

MCB4 wants to ensure that this survey is not just an exercise in collecting facts and figures, but rather that the survey should be a tool for the strengthening of the independent theater/cultural sector. Thus, MCB4 would like to ensure that the proposed theater survey address the following areas:

Independent Theater is distinct from Off-Broadway Theater. There are approximately 30 Off-Broadway theater venues in New York, predominantly in Manhattan. Based on research conducted by IndieSpace, there are approximately 120 theater venues ("Anchor venues") that are 99 seats or less ("Independent Theater"), distributed across all five boroughs of New York. Cumulatively, Independent Theater (also known as "Off-Off-Broadway") produces the vast majority of theatrical performances across the entire city. According to The New York Innovative Theatre Foundation, there are approximately 1,500 independent theater productions a year in New York City.

Independent Theater venues are also most likely to be financially at-risk. IndieSpace's research has listed approximately 90 theaters that have closed in the last two decades. The loss of Independent theater venues reduces the opportunity for experimentation and affordable artistic collaborations. This decreases the amount of innovative future productions, and limits the opportunity for artists to have a positive impact across the entire city.

As such, MCB4 calls upon the firm that conducts the survey to ensure that all aspects of independent theater— jobs and wages, real estate costs and economic impact, etc. – are addressed as a separate category from “Off-Broadway Theater”.

Ensure that Independent Theater groups are involved in the survey process from the beginning. MCB4 recommends the following Independent Theater organizations, which have not been contacted previously by MOME with regard to the RFP, be included in this fact gathering process and the eventual survey once commissioned:

- The League of Independent Theater (litny.org)
- IndieSpace (indiespace.org)
- New York Innovative Theatre Foundation (nyitawards.com)
- In addition, MCB4 believes that the survey, when conducted, should include outreach to the cultural committees of all New York City Community Boards. Many of these committees have specific knowledge regarding the organizations and venues that exist in their districts, which may not be known to the independent theater groups that are advocating generally on behalf of the sector.

Specific, actionable proposals for improving the sustainability of theater in New York. As noted above, the rising cost of real estate and cost-of-living is placing strain on New York’s theater community, particularly in the independent theater space and on individual theater artists.

Over the last few years, several proposals have been floated that could have significant positive effects on the independent theater community. This survey is an opportunity to measure the potential impact of these proposals, and what the cost might be to enact them. The recommendations section of the final report should include specific, actionable proposals to protect vulnerable theaters and promote the expansion of new small theaters.

For example:

- **Property Tax Abatement for Non-Profit Theater** – Many non-profit independent theater spaces are leased from a landlord. As such, their landlord passes them the full property tax cost at market rate. A 2010 proposal, with letters of support received from all 12 Manhattan community boards, advocated that landlords should receive a property tax abatement for the square footage they rent to non-profit arts organizations that are often referred to as “anchor venues” in the independent theater community. Property tax payments are often referred to by these anchor venues as the “13th Month of Rent.” An informal survey conducted at the time found that the cost in tax receipts would be \$3-5 million. It would be of high value to understand what the positive economic impact of such tax abatement would be to independent theater, to the small businesses that profit from independent theater, and to the city as a whole.
- **Preferred Utility Rates** – Today, state law provides for favorable utility rates for Veterans of Foreign War organizations and churches. Theaters, which often use larger amounts of energy to run their lighting grid and other equipment powered by electricity, are faced by high utility costs each month (Annually, these electrical costs amount to what the anchor venues refer to as the “14th Month of Rent.”) It would be of high value to investigate the impact of lowering utility rates for these non-profit theater venues.

- **Zoning** – One of the barriers for creating new independent theater is limited zoning that allows for theaters. Much of the existing zoning for theaters are in the most expensive areas of New York. In other industries, for example Manufacturing, zoning has been used to protect spaces for certain use so they cannot be converted for other uses. It would be of high value to investigate what zoning tools can be used to preserve existing independent theater spaces, and promote new ones.
- **Survey Community Facility Spaces** – Over the years, community boards and the Department of Building have set aside certain Community Facility spaces for non-profit and cultural uses. However, there is little centralized data on the size, current cost, availability, and suitability for housing theaters or rehearsal spaces. A clear accounting of this potential available space would be extremely useful for the cultural and non-profit community.

In addition to the proposals listed above, we anticipate that the survey will uncover additional avenues for support—and MCB4 looks forward to learning more about this vital cultural sector once the survey is completed.

MCB4 requests that this letter of support and recommendations included be attached as an Exhibit to MOME’s RFP.

Thank you for your office’s commitment to the non-Broadway/independent theater cultural community. MCB4 supports any effort that can provide factual information that can aid in our advocacy for this sector within MCB4 and ultimately throughout all five boroughs of New York City.

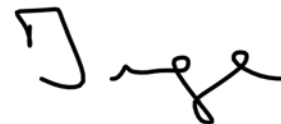
Sincerely,



Delores Rubin
Chair
Community Board 4



Allen Oster
Co-Chair
ACES Committee



Inge Ivchenko
Co-Chair
ACES Committee

cc: Mr. Guy Yedweb, League of Independent Theater
Ms. Randi Berry, IndieSpace
Ms. Virginia P. Louloudes, Executive Director
ART/NY
All Local Elected Representatives