

# **HISPANIC & SOUTH ASIAN ALLIANCE FOR FAIR REDISTRICTING IN SOUTH QUEENS**

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## **Petition to please unite our communities of interest-Richmond Hill, Ozone Park and South Ozone Park into one City Council District, in accordance with the NYS, US Constitutions, Voting Rights Act, justice and fairness**

Most Honorable NYC Districting Commission Members:

We are a group that represents the largest numbers of constituents in South Queens, namely Richmond Hill, Ozone Park and South Ozone Park. We-Latinos and South Asians alike-live with our families, and side by side in these hitherto indivisible, compact and contiguous neighborhood of Richmond Hill, Ozone Park and South Ozone Park. This is our home, and our community, built up by our blood, sweat and tears.

This proposed district will keep our neighborhoods and communities intact, with established ties of common interest, ownership and association, grounded in historical, racial, economic, ethnic, religious, and other ties. See attached.

We need united, strong voices and responsive leadership to lift our struggling community out of this pandemic. Lack of progress and hope will cripple us, unless you unite us, and let democracy prevail. We have enough constituents to form a City Council district. This cannot be business as usual.

We are the largest group in New York City, and the largest settlement and conglomeration of folks who can trace their ancestry to South Asia, South and Central America, the Caribbean and the West Indies. Moreover, as new, first and second generation Americans, we share many common bonds, and are one large family.

Our mission is to keep residents and voters in those communities together in one district, so that we can obtain common solutions to our issues and problems that affect our families on a daily basis. Many of us are essential workers and working families, whose children have served, defended and died for America-proudly. Please stop dividing and fragmenting us.

As you can see from the compact and contiguous maps submitted, we are bordered and defined by natural, geographic boundaries. In prior redistricting attempts, these natural and God-made boundaries have been consciously obliterated and ignored. It behooves you to act accordingly and unite us as a community, and not use us as filler for other communities.

Our elected officials and their staff do not look like us, nor care about us. They do not understand our customs, language or heritage. They treat us as if we are from a different planet. They look down upon us. They are imported from other communities.

We pray that you honor your mandate and duties to draw fair, common districts, and free us from the absurd, egregious gerrymandering that has divided us up unconscionably and unfairly. We have, at

present, as is evident from City Council 28 and 32 Districts, maps that resemble dinosaurs and reptiles, not communities of interest being kept together. They have been drawn to dilute and separate us, diminishing our already suppressed voices. They have *ALL* been drawn with an evil purpose in mind-protect these incumbents and suppress and dilute the communities of Richmond Hill, Ozone Park and South Ozone Park.

Everyone with a conscience call them the apartheid maps. They have been divided to suit the incumbent politicians, special interests and status quo, who do not care about us. The Covid-19 pandemic confirmed this. None of them even brought a single mask, a testing center, nor any other much needed Covid help to our hard hit community-the hardest in NYS. Shame on them, and shame on you if you preserve the *status quo*.

We could not get any help from any of them to get unemployment compensation, help us with homelessness, rent assistance, food, PEP or any other assistance, even though all of these societal problems increased during the pandemic. We could not even get help to bury our deceased. We were abandoned, and left without hope. That is why we are appealing to you. This desertion and deprivation must not be institutionalized, nor tolerated, by your revered commission any longer.

Districts must comply with state and federal laws and be similarly sized with reasonable, not zigzagging shapes. This commission, which can be an example for other states stifled and divided by partisan gerrymandering, must also consider that we are indivisible and solid “communities of interest.”

Our lives are so intertwined that we share the same heritage, ancestry, religions, places of interest, shopping centers, food markets, play the same sports, work in the same industries, have the same vocations and our children attend the same schools. We also use the same public transportation, and other facilities like libraries, Post Offices etc.

Richmond Hill, Ozone Park and South Ozone Park have the largest conglomeration of residents from South Asia that live in the USA-Guyanese, Sikhs, Trinidadians, Surinamese, Bengalis and Punjabi communities. We have been splintered, cruelly and shamelessly into several districts.

This is evil gerrymandering, and show how it dilutes and exploits communities of interest-apartheid style.

Moreover, none of these elected officials who are supposed to represent us-Hon. Adrienne Adams, (CD 28), Hon. Joann Ariola, (CD 32), Hon. Lynn Schulman (CD 29), have an office in our neighborhood. Nor do live in this area, nor do they ever come here. Most residents do not even know who these so-called representatives or their staff members are. They never return our calls for help and assistance. We don't exist, for them.

That is because our splintered neighborhoods make politicians less responsive to constituents' needs as gerrymandering diminishes our ability to influence elections. It is the same old divide and rule policy our great nation fought for in our independence against the British colonialists, now being used against us centuries later!

Look at our districts! They are the obvious end result of dicing, slicing, and gerrymandering. They eviscerate the Voting Rights Acts and the NYS and US Constitutions. The boundaries are disgraceful and shocking. They are an abomination of the redistricting standards/principles that require districts to be compact and contiguous, and preserve “communities of interest,” among other guidelines.

We contribute our fair share, to the Federal, State, and City coffers in various forms of taxes, yet we are not known. We energize the economy of the area by revitalizing businesses, the professions and other services. We are small business owners, essential workers, factory workers and laborers, engineers, lawyers, doctors and dentists, academics and teachers, brokers of real estate, insurance and financial services, businessmen and women, writers, poets, artists, and others, filling every niche of activity, and contributing tangibly to the growth and development of our neighborhoods and America.

Indeed, in these communities, there is a uniqueness in dress, dance, music, food, custom, religious routines, and other cultural practices. They convey a unique attribute to this area. One need only walk on Liberty, Atlantic, Jamaica and Rockaway Avenues, and Lefferts Boulevard in Richmond Hill, South Ozone Park and Ozone Park, yet we are not given justice, hope and due recognition.

These corrupt district lines make community organizing around school funding, health care, social services, among other political, social and workers' causes, impossible. Our political, economic and social rights have been made a mockery of. Enough is enough!

Lack of a voice has caused systemic deprivation and exploitation by government and other entities. Our communities are unfairly targeted by ICE, although we provide the tertiary workers like cooks, bell boys, household workers, cleaners, janitors, security and other personnel whose only "crime" is to secure a better life for their families in this great land of opportunity. You say we are "essential," when it suits your agenda, but "aliens" when it does not!

Moreover, whereas basements are legal for other communities, for example in Borough Park, neighboring Howard Beach, and are exempted from Department of Building enforcement sanctions, the Building Inspectors target us here with massive fines, vacate orders and other penalties. They call them "mother and daughter apartments," whereas we are violated and selectively prosecuted for having a prayer room or a recreation room in our attics and basements.

Again, we are singled out for other types of enforcement, environmental and traffic violations. We have the largest daily quota of summonses. Our small businesses are violated at higher rates, compared to other neighborhoods. At one time, a few years ago, we were the only neighborhood targeted for jaywalking. You criminalize our children with the eternal stigma of convicted felons at a far greater rate than elsewhere.

We are frustrated and deprived. We have been undercounted because some of us did not take part in the Census or speak to census takers due to building inspector harassment and immigration fears of deportation.

You must appreciate what has happened here. As the map compellingly demonstrates, our district was cut up into at least 3 City Council districts to dilute and oppress us, bypassing natural boundaries, geographic boundaries and common heritage and culture.

Our kids have to travel for hours outside our communities, in fact, counties, to get a decent education, because our schools are failing, with unacceptable graduation rates. We have no specialized High Schools in our area, because our taxes paid are unfairly routed to other neighborhoods to develop those more affluent communities-Kew Gardens, Howard Beach, Jamaica Estates, Glendale etc.

There is poor sanitation and other government services here. Grocery shopping has to be done in another district. Worship is also possible only in another district. If we have a problem, we have to run to several different officials, because they are all located in different areas, although we live just a few

blocks away from each other, resulting in the most complicated, poorest local governance and service delivery we see anywhere in New York City.

Consequently, people do not even bother to get their problems and issues addressed, whether it be educational, medical, government services, or otherwise.

Older people in the neighborhood compare this deprivation and state of affairs to the social, economic, historical and political suppression and situations they escaped from in their home countries, which forced them to seek a better life in the United States, only to proverbially “jump into the fire.”

This was the main reason they left and came here in the first place, only to face the same deprivation, suppression and denial caused by gerrymandering and the separation of our communities of interest of Richmond Hill, Ozone Park and South Ozone Park into different districts.

Minority enrollment is 96% of the student body in both schools, which is higher than the New York state average of 57%. The graduation rates for students at our sole high schools is far below the 84% rates state wide. Richmond Hill High School and John Adams High School, is at 54% and 70% respectively. It is easy for you to understand why our morale is so low, and why we feel deprived as a majority-minority community. These partitions and divisions have caused grave consequences upon us.

The reason for this is based on lack of resources, improvement and attention being paid to our community. Parents resign to a second class standard of education, due to gerrymandering and isolation of our minority community. Hope is a scarce commodity. That is why we suffered the highest infection and death rates during the recent pandemic-systemic suppression. Neglect and disenfranchisement were the root causes.

**Most of the students here, and their hardworking families are from Central and South America, Guyana, Bangladesh, Trinidad, India, Suriname, Sri Lanka, Jamaica, and can trace their roots to South Asia and Latin/South America. They live in Richmond Hill, Ozone Park and/or South Ozone Park.**

In this entire area of over 500,000 residents, there is no community center and/or senior center, after school programs, skills teaching center and/or sports center. The facilities that are supposed to save us, are not enough. We cannot help but feel ostracized in our own community, even with our dealings with law enforcement. Ambulance and law enforcement response times are the slowest in New York City.

Although we have many self-sustaining places to worship, ethnic food stores and many family members here, we have nowhere to go for assistance with homework, academic guidance, counseling, vocational, play sports, or afterschool programs. On weekends, we usually have to leave the neighborhood to find anything useful to do with our time. Our libraries are overcrowded and need expansion. Public transportation can be improved.

Please help us attain a better life. We should not have to go to different representatives to deal with issues like when both of our major high schools were proposed for closure, when we were designated the area with the highest COVID infection rates, when we are unfairly treated by the cops, and/or when we need solutions to our issues and problems like high foreclosures and poor government services.

We need a district where the elected officials will be familiar with our heritage and culture, who are from this neighborhood and who will work with the community on our needs, e.g., improve graduation rates, help with homework, spaces for students to go after school, cooling centers, better police

relations, minimizing hate crimes, domestic violence counseling, more sports grounds, give our non-profits funding, and so on. We get zero at the moment.

We strongly urge you to keep these neighborhoods together in a single City Council district in accordance with your mandate, conscience and duties. Don't blame us for voter and census apathy, and higher suicide rates if you fail us.

Thank you for consideration and attention,

Respectfully submitted,

Joshua Harris (Chairman)

Gregory Adams (President)

Juan Carlos (Vice President)

Maria Bueno (Secretary)

Elizabeth McCarthy (Treasurer)

Tara Nath (Membership)

Beann Jaigobin (Organizing Secretary)