



CITIZENS UNION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
Testimony to the New York City Districting Commission 2022-23
Preliminary Public Hearing

Staten Island Borough Hall (via Zoom)
July 7, 2022

Good afternoon, members of the New York City Districting Commission. My name is Ben Weinberg, and I am the Director of Public Policy at Citizens Union. Citizens Union is an independent and nonpartisan good government group dedicated to making democracy work for all New Yorkers. We thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Citizens Union has been monitoring the redistricting process to ensure it moves as planned, incorporates public input, and is conducted in a fair, transparent, and independent manner. We run a community training and education program that has trained hundreds of New Yorkers to engage with the Commission. Many of them have testified in the five hearings held in May, June, and July.

As the preliminary round of public hearings concludes, we offer the following suggestions to maximize participation at the August hearings.

- **First, we appreciate the Commission's work to improve public input by** conducting five preliminary hearings (not required by the City Charter), scheduling hearings before and after work hours, providing language interpreters at hearings, and announcing the August schedule well in advance. We also acknowledge that the Commission has begun making submitted testimonies and proposed maps public, and we encourage following a timelier submission upload. It took more than a month to make materials from the May 26 hearing available online. We also look forward to seeing the public online mapping tool the Commission plans to publish.
- **Increase outreach and advertising ahead of hearings, including multi-language advertising** Preparing a testimony takes time and effort. The Commission should advertise the August hearings with sufficient time for people to prepare for them. It should use community and ethnic media outlets and ensure outreach efforts are conducted in NYC's ten designated citywide languages. So far, invites to hearings have only been published in English.

- **Proactively seek input from affected areas that have not engaged in the process yet**
Although hundreds of people testified in person or submitted comments during this hearing period, some council districts remain without a voice. The Commission should actively seek input from those areas by collaborating with local community-based groups, community boards, and other trusted messengers. This is especially true for neighborhoods that could be highly affected by the redrawing of maps. For example, the 33rd district is the city's most "overpopulated" council district, but the Commission has not received input from community members on how it should change. Nor was there much input from Bay Ridge and southwest Brooklyn communities (Council District 43), which might change to accommodate for Staten Island's decreased population share.
- **Hold hearings in different marginalized communities protected under the Voting Rights Act**
To improve participation from racial and language minority groups protected by the VRA and marginalized communities, the Commission should seek to hold public hearings at sites within such communities.
- **Clarify the following on the Commission's website:**
 - o That the public can testify about boroughs other than the one in which the hearing is held.
 - o That people can submit testimonies in languages other than English.
 - o Any guidance on the type of testimonies commissioners would like to see (e.g., naming streets, borders)

In addition, as the Commission approaches the complex – and politically delicate – task of map-drawing, commissioners should take explicit steps to ensure they remain impartial when discussing, negotiating, and voting on future maps. To that end, the Commission should,

- **Adopt a code of ethics and disclosures of conversations related to map-making**
Redistricting commissions often adopt a code of ethics/conduct that addresses, among other things, how to manage political conflicts for members who are affiliated with incumbents, presumptive candidates, or campaign activities. Citizens Union has submitted detailed proposals on this issue and encourages the Commission to adopt such measures. Importantly, commissioners and officials should file disclosures after discussing details of maps with individuals outside of the Commission.
- **Publish a written explanation for the drawing of districts**
Given the complex legal and population requirements involved in drawing each district and the expected change in existing lines, it would be beneficial for the public to understand the reasons behind map-making decisions. We recommend the Commission accompany the draft plan with a narrative explaining the underlying data used to draw each district, the major factors affecting the composition of districts, and the justification for drawing those lines. The Commission can also use this explanation to invite input on specific areas on which commissioners want more information.

For more information, contact Ben Weinberg at bweinberg@citizensunion.org or visit CitizensUnion.org/NYCRedistricting.