
The Future of New York City's Community Boards: Recommendations for Retooling and Reform



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Executive Summary

Community boards are the most local form of government in New York City. There are 12 boards in Manhattan, out of 59 across the city, and these boards are at the forefront of neighborhood advocacy and planning. Boards consist of 50 volunteer members, and each board has its own paid district manager, small budget, and some have additional staff, interns, or volunteers. Their responsibilities include reviewing land use and street life applications, making city budget recommendations, weighing in on capital projects, and monitoring the delivery of city services. Boards provide a forum for residents to proactively identify and tackle important neighborhood issues. They should be places where engaged citizens can improve their communities and truly influence public policy.

The 12 Manhattan community boards may be located in distinct and diverse neighborhoods, but they face several common challenges. Current Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer has made significant progress in improving the profile of the boards. Greater public awareness and participation would make them even stronger. In addition, board members would benefit from increased city funding, technology mentors, better access to professional staff, and enhanced training programs.

When Borough President Stringer took office in 2006, he implemented a series of thoughtful and successful reforms to improve the community board recruitment, application, screening, and training process. Manhattan community boards have come a long way since then, especially in neighborhoods with partnering council members who participated in the new processes he put in place. This report outlines recommendations for building upon these initiatives to make boards more accessible and representative of the communities they serve.

Recommendation #1: Taking Boards from the Analog to Digital Age

Technology has the potential to improve participation, awareness, and transparency in local government. Yet, at certain boards, meetings are stopped so that a cassette tape can be turned over to continue recording the discussion. Community boards can and should move into the 21st century. They should utilize modern technology, websites, livestreaming, and other online resources to better connect with and empower the residents they serve.

Currently, board websites vary in content, maintenance, and level of detail - and provide little opportunity for public feedback. Websites should be a gathering point for information on local issues and community board activities. They should be regularly updated with information on upcoming events, projects, and neighborhood resources. Member attendance, meeting minutes, presentations and upcoming resolutions should also be posted online to promote transparency in board operations. All board chairs should be given a community board email account.

Community Stat should also be developed and installed in each board's office. This database system would be modeled after the City Council's Council Stat software. It would enable district managers to log, track, and map license and land use applications, complaints and concerns across the district. Boards could also use this database system to share information with agencies, elected officials, and other boards across the borough to identify hot issues and trends for action.

Livestreaming meetings would also improve outreach. In March 2012, Council Member Jessica Lappin introduced legislation in the New York City Council that would require full community board meetings to be broadcast live online, with recordings archived and made available to the public within five days. This initiative should be implemented with or without the passage of that legislation. Brooklyn Community Board 3 already live-broadcasts public meetings, and stores videos in an online archive. Manhattan Community Board 6 has expressed interest in webcasting and hopes to implement a pilot program in the near future.

Other online resources can help promote public interaction. Establishing a presence on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter would allow boards to provide instant updates, and receive comments and feedback directly from residents. Internet forums are another tool for broadening public discussions and soliciting input on local issues. For example, Manhattan Community Board 3 has used Google groups to gather ideas related to sanitary conditions near Tompkins Square Park.

Online surveys and crowd-sourcing maps are yet another way for boards to collect data to improve the safety and quality of life in a particular area. Manhattan Community Board 7 is currently using an interactive map to collect information about sidewalk clutter on the Upper West Side at <http://cb7.shareabouts.org/>. Residents are asked to identify the location of benches, newsstands, and other objects. The board will analyze this data to make recommendations on how to reduce street crowding.

To be sure, the use of evolving modern technology requires a new coordinated and deliberate training program for board members and district managers. A **Technology Coaching** program should be established to give chairs, members, and staff the technical assistance they need to harness and utilize emerging technology.

New York has some of the smartest technical minds and start-ups in the country. The borough president's office should create this Technology Coaching program by recruiting mentors to volunteer their services and expertise. These mentors should be paired with boards to help on an ongoing basis with technical questions and issues.

Recommendation #2: **Greater Diversity on Boards**

To be an effective voice for local interests, a community board's membership should reflect the talent and diversity of its district. Borough President Stringer has done an admirable job of reforming the recruitment and application process to professionalize boards and make them more reflective of their communities.

The Independent Screening Panel he established includes good government, community, and civic groups. The panel does extensive outreach to identify potential applicants and administers a standardized open application process.

As a council member, Jessica Lappin promoted and participated in these reforms. This independent screening and outreach system should be retained and the next borough president should expand and build upon Stringer's efforts to diversify boards.

Every effort should be made to ensure that board membership accurately mirrors neighborhood populations. In addition to focusing on racial, ethnic and religious representation, efforts should be made to recruit members from a variety of socioeconomic background and occupations.

Board members should come from different types of housing. Currently, Manhattan Community Boards 3 and 11 have the highest concentration of NYCHA housing in the borough, but only a handful of members actually live in public housing. Recruiting members from co-ops, condos, public housing, rent-stabilized and controlled stock, and Mitchell-Lama buildings would encourage a variety of views on development and affordable housing issues, and assist boards in assessing district needs.

It would benefit community boards to have more members who are teachers, union members, small business owners, engineers, and architects. These professionals could lend their skills and expertise on land use, urban planning, economic development, education, and other important matters.

To build out and break down the recruitment process further, the borough president should expand membership on the Independent Screening Panel and focus on continued and additional recruitment of underrepresented constituencies.

Recommendation #3:

Increasing Participation and Fairness

Community board chairs play a major role in shaping a board's agenda and operations. While the City Charter prescribes two-year staggered terms for all board members, the by-laws of each individual board determines how long a chairperson can serve. Currently, the length and limit of chair terms vary from board to board: some chairs can only serve for two years, while others have no restrictions.

The chart below illustrates the inconsistency in chairperson terms between Manhattan's 12 community boards.

Manhattan Community Board	Term Length	Term Limit	Total Years
Community Board 1	2 years	3 terms	6
Community Board 2	1 year	2 terms	2
Community Board 3	1 year	None	N/A
Community Board 4	1 year	2 terms	2
Community Board 5	1 year	4 terms	4
Community Board 6	1 year	3 terms	3
Community Board 7	1 year	2 terms	2
Community Board 8	1 year	3 terms	3
Community Board 9	1 year	4 terms	4
Community Board 10	2 years	2 terms	4
Community Board 11	2 years	3 terms	6
Community Board 12	1 year	3 terms	3

To broaden community participation and promote fairness, all 12 chairs should be subject to **the same limit in the total number of years they may serve consecutively**. Chairs are elected by their boards and not the public. Rotating leadership would help depoliticize boards and provide other members with opportunities to lead.

Several community boards also limit the time that vice-chairs, secretaries and treasurers can serve in the same position. In addition, there should be restrictions on the length of time board members can serve consecutively in any executive post, to stop officers from simply rotating positions. This would help prevent power from being concentrated with any one group, and encourage fresh approaches to board leadership.

Recommendation #4: Training and Tools to Tackle Tough Issues

For many community board members, this is their first time serving on a board of any kind. Borough President Stringer developed Community Board 101, a training program on topics including land use, budgeting, conflicts of interest, and ethics. That program should be expanded to a **Community Board College** to ensure that members fully understand their charter-mandated responsibilities and also have the tools to develop their capacity as active community planners.

These training sessions should be devised in a way that respects that board members are volunteers with busy schedules. They should be concise, cover a wide array of topics - like how to use technology or how to influence the delivery of social services - and be available either in person or by webinar. These classes should also take into account that some members have been on boards for decades, and others for days, and should be tailored to experience level. Enabling active participation in these sessions would allow board members to have a greater impact in their role and provide cross-board exchanges of ideas.

Special training and networking sessions should also be arranged for new board chairs, so they could learn best practices on how to run efficient meetings and draw from the knowledge of other current and former chairs. Additionally, exit interviews should be conducted so that outgoing board members may provide insight on their reasons for leaving, and areas where the board can improve.

Recommendation #5: Increasing Resources for Planning and Development

One of the main responsibilities of a community board is to make recommendations on land use applications. This should enable boards to play a major role in determining the look, feel, and future of their neighborhoods. However, reviewing technical proposals, significant rezoning applications, or undertaking a 197-A plan, can place a significant strain on a board. There are also certain times of the year when board staff may be overwhelmed by street life or parade issues, and access to additional staff, at the board level or within the borough president's office, would help dramatically. Boards need greater access to resources to fulfill their crucial roles as community planners.

The New York City Charter explicitly authorizes boards "to utilize the services of such other professional staff and consultants, including planners and other experts, as it may deem appropriate."¹ But without adequate funding, that isn't possible.

Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer has lobbied for charter reforms to fund full-time urban planners. In the interim, he established the Urban Fellowship Program, which partners urban planning graduate students with community boards, to help address this issue. The

¹ New York City Charter, Chapter 70, § 2800-21 (F).

program is an innovative way to provide boards with free technical support. At a minimum, it should be retained. And, when necessary to fulfill its mission, a community board needs to have access to additional professional staff.

In recent years, the City Council has consistently restored cuts to city funding for the boards. In the last two years, the funding for all boards in the city has increased to \$15,157,000 in FY 13. The next borough president needs to continue to be actively engaged in lobbying and advocating for this critical funding during budget negotiations between the City Council speaker and mayor. Restoring and augmenting this funding has to be top priority.

Recommendation #6: Streamlining the Business Application Process

When business owners apply for a liquor license, sidewalk café, newsstand or street activity permit, they are required to appear before the local community board. Currently, the business application processes vary from board to board, which can be confusing and burdensome to applicants, including small businesses, and women and minority-owned enterprises.

Some boards require applicants to complete a questionnaire before coming to the requisite committee of the board. Others publish a set of guidelines that the applicant must follow. Still others require some sort of notification to the affected neighborhood of the pending application and/or petition signatures from residents in surrounding buildings. Some boards have none of these requirements.

A **simplified, online, and uniform application** procedure would benefit both businesses owners and neighborhoods. Applicants should be able to fill out online questionnaires, and their responses should be published on board websites. This would streamline the process for business owners and provide residents with the information they need to fairly assess applications.

Conclusion

Community boards were designed to provide New Yorkers with a meaningful say in the decisions that affect their everyday lives. In order to do that, efforts must be made, through technology, diversity recruitment, training, and in other ways, to raise public participation and improve transparency.

Technology can play a role in connecting boards with residents to improve services and planning, and a technology coaching and mentorship program should be created to help boards move into the modern age. Changes in the composition and rules governing boards would also help bring a broader spectrum of voices to the table. In the long term, boards need additional resources to fulfill their roles as community planners. As New York City continues to grow and evolve, we must work to strengthen and reform community boards so they can remain at the frontlines in shaping our city's future.