



Activism or Joining the System or Both?

Posted by [Glenn](#) on February 17, 2006 - 12:47am in [The Oil Drum: Local](#)

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I'm really starting to build a local base of activism for environmentally friendly ideas. I've been thinking about setting up a separate website like the [Park Slope Neighbors](#) or paying the \$19/month for a [Meet-Up](#) site. Another site recommended to me is the [Open Plans Project](#). The Gotham Gazette has also run a series of articles about [local cyber-activism](#). This would help sustain my local environmental initiatives and give a voice to the majority of people in the district that support these ideas against the narrow micro-NIMBY naysayers and stagnant institutional players like the [NYC Department of Transportation](#).

But maybe there is another path? Interlofer [comments](#) in my last post that I should apply for open spots on my local community board. BP Scott Stringer and the local council members will have full rights to appoint new people to the board. Indeed Stringer has made Community Board reform [a major issue](#).

So what's a budding activist to do? Apply for Board membership or continue to build a local movement for policies that will help soften the impact of peak oil? Would it be possible to do both?

I welcome thoughts from my dear readers.

From Stringer's website on CB reform:

There are twelve Community Boards in the borough of Manhattan--fifty-nine across all of New York City--charged with representing community interests on crucial issues of development and planning, land use, zoning and service delivery. Members of these boards are pivotal designers of their communities, and work to both enhance and preserve the character of the city's many unique neighborhoods. Each board is equipped with 50 members, a budget, a district manager and staff to be the independent and representative voice of its community.

The Community Board system is also one of the Borough President's most significant areas of responsibility. All Community Board appointments are made by the Borough President--half of them unilaterally, and half upon recommendation by City Council members. When these boards assess the needs of their communities, the Borough President, in turn, voices those needs to the City and State at large. The power of these boards has, in the past, been underestimated. With the mindset of reform, however, Manhattan's Community Boards can bring about a new understanding of government by the people and for the people.

At their best, Community Boards are the empowered forces of their neighborhoods, and at his best, the Borough President is their steadfast collaborator. To access this potential, responsibility lies with the Borough President himself to communicate and mobilize a vision of Manhattan's Community Boards. Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer is already taking steps towards reforming and empowering Community Boards, steps that will benefit all New Yorkers.

and here's what he wants to do:

Borough President Scott M. Stringer's Agenda for Community Board Reform

My greatest power to leverage change in Manhattan comes from the borough itself: most specifically from the twelve Community Boards that represent it. Community Boards are the most local unit of government. Last year, the city spent more than \$2.6 million on the operations of Manhattan's Community Boards. Community Boards are the conscience and voice of our neighborhoods. The full potential of Community Boards has not yet been realized. Notwithstanding their achievements, these boards have been historically undermined by inefficiencies and a lack of accountability and diversity. A recent examination of Manhattan Community Board operations found that: The Community Board appointment process is overly politicized and unsystematic; Community Board funds are distributed inequitably and without review; Boards operate with ongoing vacancies; Undisclosed lobbying is commonplace; Conflicts of interest laws have not been enforced, but rather ignored; Boards operate without any external requirement of assessment and evaluation. Why does this matter? This matters because this is our city, and because in suboptimal conditions we achieve suboptimal results. Efficient and accountable Community Boards would empower Manhattan's neighborhoods in unprecedented ways, and allow them to cultivate the futures they seek. My office is taking the initiative to reform and empower Manhattan's Community Boards. This task is not required of the Borough President, yet it is the bold responsibility my staff and I have assumed in our desire to make Manhattan a place of promise for all its residents. Some of these reforms are immediate; others will require long-term planning and oversight. Ultimately, however, these reforms will restore each Board to its rightful place on the frontlines of community planning and advocacy. Here are the steps towards reform we are taking:

Revamping Recruitment Efforts to Encourage Community Board Member Applications To ensure that Board members embody the diversity and expertise necessary to fight for all local residents' needs, we are strengthening the recruitment and application process. Specialized community liaisons from my office are meeting with a range of groups and community-based organizations throughout the borough to raise awareness of our revitalized Community Boards. We are handing out applications to everyone interested in becoming a board member.

Establishing an Independent Screening Panel for Board Appointment and Ending ad hoc Removals My staff and I have formed a Community Board Reform Committee that will function as an independent screening panel for all board applicants. This Committee is comprised of Community-Based Organizations, and is establishing a standard set of criteria by which board applicants will be assessed. Furthermore, just as members are now systematically appointed, they will no longer be removed on an ad hoc basis. In my administration, Community Board Members will be appointed and serve according to merit. The Community-Based Organizations represented on my screening panel are: The New York League of Conservation Voters, Partnership for NYC, the League of Women Voters, the Municipal Art Society, NYPIRG, the Brennan Center for Justice, Citizen's Union, the Women's City Club of NY, the NAACP, the Hispanic Federation, West Harlem Environmental Action, Regional Plan Association and the Urban League.

Developing a More Thorough Application Process to Become a Community Board Member This year, my staff and I hope to have at least 3 applications for every 1 open spot. The process is now more thorough than ever before. We've drafted a new application that provides us comprehensive information on applicant backgrounds. This new application will provide the Community Board Reform Committee the means to assemble the most representative and diverse board memberships possible. Each applicant, including those seeking re-appointment, must submit an application to my office, postmarked no later than February 28, 2006.

Incorporating Feedback from the Borough President's Community Board Questionnaires Neighborhoods know best. That's why, immediately following my election, I solicited questionnaires from all of the Community Board Members, District Managers and Chairs to get their feedback on how Community Boards should be reformed. The results gave us key insights into the priorities, satisfactions and dissatisfactions of Manhattan's Community Boards. We will soon be posting the questionnaire analysis on this website.

Assigning Urban Planners to Support Each Community Board Given that much of the work conducted by Community Boards revolves around issues of Land Use and planning, we have set in motion a provision of resources to each Community Board with urban planning expertise. My office is establishing an "Urban Fellowship" program with New York City universities so that graduate students in metropolitan studies and urban planning programs can assist the professional, in-house urban planners and gain valuable hands-on experience. Ultimately, every board should have a paid professional urban planner on staff that can support the design of 197-A plans and analysis of land use proposals for long-term community development. This assistance will yield a development plan representative of the community's needs that can be submitted for approval by the City Planning Commission and the City Council. I am beginning discussions with the Mayor and City Council to secure additional funding to support such full-time planning assistance.

Introducing Legislation to Make Conflicts of Interest Laws Enforceable Without records of financial interest, the Conflicts of Interest Board (COIB) is forced to rely on the honor system, greatly compromising their ability to regulate potentially harmful conflicts of interest on Community Boards. Our office is working to draft legislation on the state level to allow the COIB to accept a shortened financial disclosure form, which Community Board Chairs can fill out to make the conflicts of interest law enforceable. In the interim, we have updated the Community Board application to include questions regarding conflicts of interest. And as a further measure to promote transparency, members of the public may request to review these applications according to the Freedom of Information Law (FOIL).

Setting Board Budgets to Reflect Their Constituencies New York City allocates over \$12 million dollars a year to the entirety of Community Board budgets. While one Community Board will vary from another in the size and needs of the members of its district, money has not, in the past, been distributed proportionately. Every Community Board has the right, and the mandate, to optimize its effectiveness. For this reason, I am drafting proposals and consulting with the Office of the Mayor, the City Council and my fellow Borough Presidents to provide funding correspondent to the population served by each Community Board.

Providing Ongoing Training and Support for Community Board Members and their Staffs Following the appointment of Community Board Members, my office will serve as a resource and a guide for the operations of every board. We will work with each Community Board according to its specific needs, and collaborate with them to develop ongoing training services for board staff members on issues including budgeting, land use procedures, conflicts of interest and ethics.

Strengthening Accountability of Community Board Operations By coordinating with each Community Board office, we will set minimum district requirements as it relates to service delivery and require annual reports addressing board finances, operations and progress. This devoted attention to Manhattan's Community Boards is unprecedented. And the mobilization, communication and empowerment that will result will be the means by which the promise of New York will be delivered.



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