



Queens Civic Congress

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QUEENS CIVIC CONGRESS TESTIFIES ON CITY BUDGET TO QUEENS BORO BOARD

In testimony presented today (Wednesday, February 18, 2009) to the Queens Borough Board, Queens Civic Congress [QCC] called for seven day libraries, more resources to protect neighborhoods from rampant overdevelopment and real estate tax equity for homeowners and tenants. The statement, presented at Borough Hall by QCC President Corey B. Bearak, follows:

Borough President Marshall and Borough Board Members:

Thank you for affording Queens Civic Congress this opportunity to comment on the City's Preliminary Expense and Capital Budget. As an umbrella group of 110 and growing civic organizations, our membership represents every community in the borough.

Queens Civic Congress recognizes the difficult times facing our city and the critical choices before our public officials. Our view remains support for core services as a priority. This definition includes making our branch libraries true community resources by ensuring these signature facilities open SEVEN (7) DAYS a week and eight to ten (8-10) hours per day. Zoning and building concerns continue to plague our communities. Many Queens communities await rezonings; the wait goes back five years or more. If City Planning lacks resources, it must add planners or other staff, whether the agency redeploys resources, borrows help City Hall re-assigns it or simply adds new staff. The Mayor must be held to his 2005 reelection commitment.

The Buildings Department (DOB), responding to the concerns of Queens Civic Congress and others has made administrative and proposed legislative reforms to improve its capabilities; resource-wise, Queens Civic Congress urges the Borough Board to make the DOB use the revenue it collects for plan examination and code enforcement for those purposes.

Over the last three fiscal years, the Council directed \$25,000 in total to enable Queens Civic Congress Foundation, a non-profit organization founded by the civic congress but with its distinct board, by-laws and corporate status; it assists our member organizations on zoning and related land use and code issues. Since FY2006, we have requested \$50,000 for to empower our civics to conduct zoning and related studies. Funding to date enabled every civic to receive City Green Books, City Planning's Zoning Handbooks and a Historic Districts Council Landmark Preservation guide We seek that amount this year. Specifically, we seek this amount for the Queens Civic Congress Foundation to provide consulting services and materials such as maps, photography, photocopying for civics seeking rezoning and landmark districting.

- over, please -

There remains the need to review neighborhood zoning at a pace greater than what the City Planning Department can or will undertake. The Foundation works directly with civic associations in the borough to present preservation and re-zoning proposals to city agencies. It also supported the workshops and forums – open to the public – to assist civic and community leaders and concerned community members address such technical issues involving zoning and landmarking and historical preservation. It also supports forums on Buildings and code enforcement, Parks, School and transit issues. Our next forum, on Zoning, is set for March 30.

We also make forum and workshop materials also available through our QueensCivicCongress.org website. There have been informal discussions that will develop into something more, a Queens Civic Institute – that is the working title – we explore the best means to institutionalize some of the programming and technical assistance on a borough-wide basis and may come back to you with more specifics in that regard.

Queens Civic Congress also recommends our elected officials look to our [CIVIC 2030](#) platform for cost-effective measures that address the City's structural deficit; the Queens Civic Congress fiscal platform finds more preferable the use of “pay-as-you-go capital” and capital debt reduction (pay-down). Reducing future debt service and costs reduces the size of the future budget and saves more funds than any set aside of dollars in a special fund. CIVIC2030 also includes PIT [reform](#) that the City Council Speaker essentially embraced in her 2009 State of the City even if the credited parties likely lifted the [proposal](#) from us and slightly re-packaged it.

[Real](#) Property Tax Reform remains an important concern and with the fiscal outlook, the possibility of several billion through QCC's real estate tax [reform](#), certainly merits a close look. The Queens Civic Congress real property tax system [reform](#) would re-introduce equity, fairness and transparency to a blatantly unfair system which benefits the wealthiest owners of the most ritzy properties, often cooperatives east, south and west of Central Park. Does it not make sense to replace the City's antiquated, inequitable and unfair real estate tax regime AND nets the City some five billion dollars – yes, \$5,000,000,000 without gouging middle and working class homeowners, businesses and tenants. You can make a real difference by advancing this change for good rather than a stale resort to hiking property taxes advanced by the administration.

Our tax reform proposals will help more New Yorkers who need the help – middle, moderate and lower income homeowners and tenants with tax bills that approximate the payments made before the infamous 25% (that was the actual percent increase on homeowners' bills when the rate increased 18% a few years back.). We do not include our Non-resident Income Tax [reform](#) which should raise nearly \$1.8 billion as a budget proposal in recognition of the compelling need for additional revenue to support the MTA capital plan; this revenue reform raises absolutely NONE of the problems – from fairness and equity to efficiency and enormity – associated with the congestion tax which the Congress opposes; this revenue measure shares the proceeds with our Long Island and northern suburbs so it prove passable those region's state legislators review it and realize their constituents' dollars would fund mass transit projects including in their home counties.

Queens Civic Congress stands ready to work with our elected officials as we all seek to move our City forward. Thank you.