



Dear Neighbor,

As I write this letter to you, we have just concluded the budget negotiations that will result in New York State's budget for next year. As you may know, the Governor presents an executive budget in January detailing the state's priorities and financial plan for all the various programs dependent on state funding. Much of the budget involves certain fixed costs in areas

as diverse as transportation, healthcare, corrections and education. Once the executive budget is released, both houses of the legislature analyze changes from the prior year and begin their internal discussions of those appropriations they support, or those they find wanting.

In early March, each house passes a budget resolution that lays out their priorities in response to the executive budget. Once these resolutions are passed negotiations commence, and conference committees based on areas such as transportation or higher education are appointed with members of the Assembly and Senate to work out differences in their respective positions. Throughout this period the Governor, Assembly Speaker and Senate Majority Leader are meeting as well.

In some ways, this year's executive budget is a dramatic change from past budgets. While there were some substantial sticking points, and frustrations, our new governor didn't engage in the usual wasteful practice of cutting key programs forcing the Legislature to restore them, before being able to target essential and effective programs that can move New York forward and support a full and robust recovery.

As chair of the Assembly Higher Education committee, I am pleased that this budget offers real investment in New Yorkers. The budget increases operating aid for SUNY and CUNY to hire more full-time faculty, creates access to tuition assistance for part time students and for incarcerated students, adds more resources to opportunity programs for educationally and economically disadvantaged students, expands capital expenditures for necessary upgrades and maintenance, and even adds resources for new facilities desperately needed by our public university systems including startup funds for childcare centers at campuses without them.

Naturally, there are areas of investment that I believe are crucial and vigorously advocated for them. These include additional funds for students with disabilities; the assumption of the SUNY public hospitals debt service so they are treated as any other state entity since they are key both to providing healthcare in their regions—SUNY Upstate in Central New York, Stony Brook on Long Island and SUNY Downstate in Brooklyn—and training healthcare professionals; and support for Community Colleges which are the gateway to higher education.

It is our work as legislators to celebrate the parts of the budget that will help New Yorkers, and to be clear eyed on its limitations so we can advocate for an even better and more equitable budget next year. I look forward to working with my colleagues to do just that.

Sincerely,

Deborah

The State of Health Care in New York

There are many lessons to take from the pandemic, but one of the starkest is how much access to health and mental health resources impacts us and our communities. We have learned that when governments marshal their resources to offer widespread access to health measures like free testing and vaccines, it benefits us all. We understand more deeply that mental health can be precarious, and that a lack of access to quality care can cause personal crises and ripple out into our communities. The pandemic also showed us how interconnected we are and at the same time laid bare how much factors like race, income, and insurance eligibility impact our health outcomes and experiences.

I am hopeful that the worst of COVID-19 is behind us. However, health crises will continue to occur, and mental health treatment will continue to be critical to ensuring a healthy city. I am committed to fighting to expand access to care for all New Yorkers, and I am heartened by aspects of the new budget which include funds to support bonuses for frontline health and mental hygiene workers, implementing a mental health crisis hotline, and the creation of a Transgender and Gender Non-Binary (TGNB) Wellness and Equity Fund.

I am also proud to support bills in the Assembly that would alleviate stress and provide greater access to healthcare, including: the New York Health Act (A.6058) which would create a universal single payer health plan for all New Yorkers; (A.3470B) which protects people from medical debt by simplifying hospital bills, lessening interest rates and other measures; and Coverage for All (A.880A) which expands eligibility to individuals who currently face barriers to coverage through the NY State of Health Marketplace due to their immigration status.

If you are having trouble accessing healthcare, resources exist!

- If you are not covered by an employer and interested to know if you're eligible for Medicaid or purchasing insurance, visit www.nystateofhealth.ny.gov.
- NYC Care guarantees low- or no-cost medical care to New Yorkers who don't qualify for or can't afford insurance; find out more at www.nyccare.nyc.
- Community Health Advocates provides free assistance in resolving healthcare and medical billing issues, and can help people find coverage, by phone: 1-888-614-5400 or by visiting www.communityhealthadvocates.org.



Fighting for the right to choose is as critical as ever, and I was pleased to join Senator Chuck Schumer and other elected colleagues and advocates to rally support for H.R. 3755, the Women's Health Protection Act, which strengthens protections at the federal level to ensure that state governments cannot limit a provider's ability to provide abortion related healthcare.

- NYC Well connects New Yorkers to free, confidential crisis counseling, mental health and substance use support, information and referrals. They are available 24 hours/day by phone: 1-888-692-9355 and by texting "WELL" to 651-73.
- NY Project Hope, a program of the NY State Office of Mental Health also provides free, confidential mental health and COVID grief support. Visit www.nyprojecthope.org, or call the Emotional Support Helpline to speak with a crisis counselor: 1-844-863-9314.

Calling for More Supportive Housing

Rates of homelessness have skyrocketed in New York in recent years. According to the Coalition for the Homeless, the number of New Yorkers sleeping in City-run shelters each night is 16% higher than it was a decade ago. Astoundingly, that number has grown 91% for single adults. There are over 48,000 people, including over 15,000 children, sleeping in shelters nightly, the highest levels of homelessness since the Great Depression. And while there is no accurate count for how many people sleep in the streets or subway system, that number is estimated to be in the thousands.

Public safety has become a concern for many during the pandemic, and addressing homelessness has been raised as an integral part of that conversation. So far we have seen largely punitive approaches, such as the mayor's initiative to remove homeless people from the subways without providing them with adequate alternatives. However, we know that the vast majority of people living in shelters or on the streets are not unhoused by choice. Research shows that the primary cause of homelessness, especially for families, is a lack of affordable housing, and that adults experiencing homelessness are often dealing with high rates of serious mental illness, addiction disorders, or other health problems. These factors can make moving out of shelters or off the streets especially difficult, as people contend not only with the New York Housing market but also with their own health and mental health issues or the emotional and psychological trauma often caused by homelessness. To reduce homelessness and support our unhoused neighbors, we should be focused not on punishment, but on addressing these challenges.

An investment in supportive housing is key. Supportive housing is wholly different from a shelter – it is permanent affordable housing owned and operated by non-profit organizations that offer onsite services to support the needs of their tenants. The non-profit organizations help facilitate mental and physical healthcare, treatment for addiction, employment, and even basic life skills for those who require such supports. Studies show that supportive housing is the single most effective solution for ending homelessness. Tenants are able to live with little risk of eviction and get the help they need to gain stability and make a home. Supportive housing units are more cost-effective than shelters, jails, or other institutional alternatives, and most importantly, allow tenants to live with dignity in their communities. Research shows that supportive housing buildings are often a boon to their neighborhoods, by raising property values and increasing the safety and quality of life in the surrounding areas.

I'm glad that our newly enacted state budget includes \$1.5 billion for the creation and rehabilitation of 10,000 supportive housing units, as well as \$110 million for the Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative. Locally, the City made an important commitment in 2015 to create 15,000 more units of supportive housing over the next 15 years. We must ensure that commitment is met, and that existing units are

maintained and their services fully funded. The Supportive Housing Network of New York recently conducted a survey of their members and found there was a 10% vacancy rate across buildings, with some units remaining vacant for over a year, due to a lack of referrals. This is despite a waitlist of 8,000 applicants. The City should invest in the staff and systems needed to ensure that people who are unhoused can be matched to vacant units as quickly as possible. Homelessness is an extremely complicated issue, and supportive housing is not the only solution; however, it's one of the most effective, and welcoming new units into our neighborhoods should be a top priority.



Covid rapid tests are an important tool for helping us move past the pandemic, and I was happy to provide tests to many organizations in the district, including the great team at Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association, a longtime model for how community members can work together to preserve and maintain affordable housing in their neighborhoods.

It's Not Just About Tall Buildings; It's About Democracy

In late 2021, the NYC Council approved the SoHo/NoHo Neighborhood Plan, a community-wide rezoning of a large section of Lower Manhattan, which was promoted by the City as a way to alleviate the affordable housing crisis. However, after years of participation in the Envision SoHo/NoHo process, the SoHo/NoHo Neighborhood Plan Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP), the St. John's Terminal/550 Washington development, the Hudson Square Rezoning, and the NYU 2031 Plan, it is clear that the promised community benefits which were to accompany each development in our neighborhoods have not materialized.

Luxury buildings with glass façades are usually constructed without also ensuring the construction of a school or expansion of a subway station. If our communities are meant to accommodate further development and increases in neighborhood density and height, then at the very least we should be guaranteed schools, public transit improvements, protected green spaces, and increases in affordable housing. Unfortunately, our residents have repeatedly been forced to decide between public park space and affordable housing, grocery stores and public schools, and empty storefronts and outdoor dining. The City has a consistent appetite for neighborhood rezoning but can never seem to strengthen the City Environmental Quality Review (CEQR) formula which would require developers to include community benefits in their proposals.

When communities are skeptical of development projects, they are maligned for being opposed to the creation of affordable housing or in

favor of maintaining free on-street parking. This is a shallow critique. An opposition to overdevelopment is not simply about the construction of tall buildings or an opposition to change in our neighborhoods. In reality, development pressures from the real estate industry tend to serve one purpose: those who will profit from the project. So much of the current discourse regarding resiliency efforts against storms made worse by climate change include an element of development which serves no other discernible need than to pay for the project itself. The rezoning proposals and development pressures from real estate entities only bring buildings which are detrimental to birds due to reflective glass and increase the heat island effect in Manhattan, without the promised affordable housing.

Recently, there has been a notion that community boards hamstring public processes like ULURP, and the City should just bypass local review. This is a wholly undemocratic idea and harkens back to a time of alderman and a spoils system rife with corruption and bribery. If our communities want schools constructed, subway stations rehabilitated, or public parks improved then we must break this dependence our City has on using luxury housing and commercial development as a vehicle for minor public improvements. We can only address climate change, systemic inequality, a lack of affordable housing, and increased public benefit when the City listens to residents and engaged community members and not solely to the real estate industry.

Hate Crimes and the Importance of Education

The dramatic rise in hate crimes during the past two years has been felt deeply in New York City. Overall complaints of hate crimes in the City increased by 100% in 2021, with anti-Asian hate-crimes increasing by 343%. There are also increased reports of anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim attacks and a large increase in attacks based on sexual orientation and gender identity. These increases only represent incidents that are reported to the police; we know that incidents of identity-based attacks are likely much higher.

At the same time, we are witnessing a national push against educating people about the legacies of racism and other types of discrimination in the United States. “Critical race theory” is a framework for legal analysis that argues the importance of considering the role of racial bias in American law and policy. Given our country’s clear history of using the law to uphold discrimination and racial subjugation (slavery, Jim Crow laws, school segregation, national exclusion laws, etc.) this idea seems straight-forward enough. However, pundits and others have seized on the concept, misrepresenting it and arguing that critical race theory includes any conversation about race or discrimination, and that its explicit goal is to shame white people.

These reactionary forces are having real, and terrifying, success in suppressing learning. Tactics range from banning specific books to more wide-reaching education bills that move to ban critical race theory from being taught in schools or require teachers to present multiple perspectives on historical events without deferring to one. While this may sound innocuous, its implications are not; famously, a school district in Texas told teachers if they have a book about the horrors of the Holocaust in their classroom, they need to also have a book containing the opposing view. This false equivalency is dangerous and divisive. In Florida, a law was just passed

that bans discussions of sexuality and gender identity in primary school and restricts them in upper grades; educators are also required to out students to their families, even if they suspect that student might experience abuse and neglect as a result. In total, a report by PEN America found that more than 120 critical race theory bans have been introduced in state legislatures since January 2021 despite the fact that the legal analysis involved is taught only in higher education not in grades K-12.

While some argue that learning about oppression teaches young people to see difference, we know the opposite is true. Research shows when young people are not taught explicitly about oppression, prejudiced views they take in from media, peers, and other influences take hold and flourish. Wanting to shield children from discomfort is understandable; shielding them from the truth, especially when it comes at a great emotional and material cost to their peers and neighbors, is unacceptable. In these discussions, the discomfort of young people who are experiencing racism at school or whose identities are being erased out of their curriculum is never acknowledged, nor is the damage that’s done to all of us when we don’t have a clear understanding of our history and reality.

Many of us are heartbroken by the violence we have witnessed or experienced over the past two years. This moment requires that rather than turn away from difference, we turn toward it, embracing it and working to understand one another and what we need to thrive. James Baldwin famously said, “People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction.” We need many approaches to combat hate crimes and other prejudiced attacks, and educating ourselves about the world we live in and how it impacts us differently is an essential foundation to doing that work.

Fighting for Safer Streets For All

The pandemic has impacted every aspect of New York City, including how we use the streets. According to the MTA, subway ridership remains significantly lower than it was pre-pandemic, with many stations accommodating less than half of the riders they served in 2019. While some of this decrease is due to ongoing remote work, many riders have simply moved their commute to the streets. More people are biking, and the number of newly registered vehicles was up over 120,000 between September 2020 and August 2021. There’s also been a surge in delivery trucks serving those who rely on e-commerce for everything from groceries to medication to furniture. New grocery app and food delivery workers who are pressured to use e-bikes to meet unreasonably speedy delivery demands add a dangerous element to our streetscapes.

My office receives numerous complaints about street and sidewalk safety, whether it’s pedestrians being hit or nearly hit by e-bikes, or cyclists concerned that cars aren’t respecting the rules regarding bike lanes. In fact, 2021 saw the highest number of traffic deaths in nearly a decade, with a pedestrian being killed by a car every three days on average. This is unacceptable, and we must do more to ensure that our streets become safer. The City and State have made important investments in pedestrian and cyclist safety, but the data on 2021 traffic deaths makes clear we must build on those investments.

I have consistently urged the former and current Mayors and the Department of Transportation (DOT) to increase messaging to drivers and e-bike riders. Public education campaigns can be a powerful tool for ensuring that the rules of the road are followed, that bikes stay off the sidewalks, and that drivers and riders are aware of the slower reaction times and mobility challenges of some pedestrians, including older New Yorkers. I’ve also advocated for protected bike lanes, and it’s great to see more fortified bike lanes implemented over the last year. In 2021, I was pleased to co-sponsor the MTA Access Bill, which requires the Metropolitan Transportation Authority to improve bicycle and pedestrian access at its bridges and passenger stations.

I am the primary sponsor of a bill establishing a “Crash Victims Bill of Rights” so that victims and their loved ones are protected in the aftermath of a crash, and I co-sponsor several bills in the Assembly that would increase traffic safety, including a bill requiring instruction in pedestrian and cyclist safety in drivers education courses; and bills requiring that “complete street” design principles are incorporated into any projects undertaken by the DOT receiving State or Federal funding so that cyclist and pedestrian use is prioritized.

I have been a stalwart advocate for speed cameras, and sponsored the legislation that revived the City’s program and expanded it. Speed cameras allow for automated enforcement, and work by using radar and laser technology to measure a vehicle’s speed and, after DOT review, issue

a ticket if the speed limit is exceeded by more than ten miles an hour. Cameras are placed in school zones based on data on speed incidence and serious crashes, and are currently in use Monday-Friday, 6 AM to 10 PM. The program has been a resounding success; since it began in 2014, speeding violations are down an average of 72% at camera locations during the hours of operation.

This Session, I have a bill to expand the use of existing speed cameras to 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Data tells us that while speed cameras are highly effective, 30% of traffic incidents in speed camera zones occur when cameras aren’t operating. Some have expressed concerns about the equity of speed camera placement, and I know there is a history of inequitable street safety design and traffic policing. Importantly, the data shows that this speed camera program protects neighborhoods at a low cost to residents. Just under half of violators never receive a second violation, and two-thirds of violators are not residents of the neighborhoods where the camera catches them. In fact, over 40% of violators have vehicles registered outside of New York City. Cameras are located in every neighborhood in the city, and are a vital tool in keeping everyone, but especially our children, safe. And, critically, the use of this technology is both race-neutral and lessens police and community interactions, reducing the chance of a traffic violation escalating into a more serious incident.

It’s unclear how long our streets will be impacted by the changes we’ve experienced over the last two years, but it’s critical for us to meet the challenges and keep everyone on the streets and sidewalks safe.



It was a pleasure to join NYCDOT Commissioner Ydanis Rodriguez, Oonee Founder Shabazz Stuart, and colleagues and bike advocates to celebrate the installation of a new bicycle parking pod in the Meatpacking District as part of a city-wide pilot program – an important step toward creating more infrastructure to support cyclists.

CORRESPONDENCE CORNER

Letters and testimony play an essential role in the offices of elected officials and I want to highlight some of the writing my office has produced in the past few months to share this important part of our work with you.

Abortion Rights and Social Media Accountability

Earlier this year, I wrote to Google and Meta (Facebook) with concerns about social media companies restricting access to accurate information regarding abortion options, while anti-choice organizations are often allowed to spread misinformation with little to no oversight. This misinformation not only limits pregnant people's access to medical care, but is also used to fuel anti-choice violence. I asked the companies to clarify what steps they are taking to ensure that reproductive health organizations are treated fairly on their platforms; that the data collected by their platforms is not used to punish pregnant people accessing necessary and constitutionally protected medical care; and whether they have taken specific steps in response to laws like SB 8 in Texas to ensure that personal data is not used to further immoral and unconstitutional lawsuits and prosecutions.

Pressing for Affordable Housing at 5 WTC

In February, I wrote to the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC) and Empire State Corporation (ESD) regarding the redevelopment plan for 5 World Trade Center. While Site 5 is located just outside of District 66, I feel strongly that this redevelopment is a critical opportunity to create a dynamic, largely affordable residential building that contains community-focused spaces, pioneers innovative sustainability designs, and adds to the vibrancy of Lower Manhattan. I urged LMDC and ESD to heed the community's call for changes to the proposed restrictive design guidelines to allow for a dramatic expansion of permanent affordable residential units.

Fighting for a Grocery Store and a School

There has been growing concern about the potential loss of the Morton Williams grocery store located at the corner of La Guardia Place and Bleecker Street. During the 2012 NYU Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP), Community Board 2, then Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer, and others negotiated for the Morton Williams site to eventually become a school if the School Construction Authority (SCA) found a need existed and elected to have a school at this location. In late 2021, the SCA made that election to build a school known to NYU. In those same negotiations in 2012, NYU agreed to maintain a grocery store in the area, namely a Morton Williams, but located in one of the other buildings that would be under construction. My colleagues in government and I have written to NYU seeking to hold them to that agreement. We are working to both retain the grocery store in the immediate neighborhood and ensure that a long-promised school is built in that space, and we are continuing to discuss the situation with NYU and the SCA.

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NEIGHBORHOOD UPDATE

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I was delighted to join CUEUP and other advocates to raise awareness about the City's Open Restaurants program and its impact on other small businesses, quality of life concerns, and the issue of ceding public street and sidewalk space for private commercial use.