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TESTIMONY OF CITY COUNCIL MEMBER PIERINA SANCHEZ City Charter Revision Commission | July 22, 2024

Chair Scissura and Members of the Commission,

Good evening. My name is Pierina Sanchez, and I am the New York City Council Member for District 14 — representing Kingsbridge, Fordham, University Heights and Mount Hope in the Bronx — and serve as Chair of the Committee on Housing and Buildings. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony this evening.

I am testifying tonight to express significant concerns with the review process this Commission has undertaken — a process that has placed speed over sustained and thoughtful engagement with everyday New Yorkers. Revising our city’s charter is a serious task; but this process has not taken our communities seriously. In just two months, the Mayor has pushed forward a Charter revision that disregards basic democratic principles of collaboration and co-creation. The intent, it seems, was never to revise our city’s “constitution” in good faith. Instead, the process has been warped— to undermine the Council’s own legislative and public review processes, and undemocratically stall consideration by the public of recent legislation, passed with a veto-proof majority of the Council, that would provide common-sense checks and balances on Mayoral appointments. Simply put, New Yorkers deserve better.

To that end, I ask that the Commission take two steps in the immediate future. First, slow its process and commit to a robust engagement process over the next year to give our communities **ample time to make their voices heard** and put forward their own proposals before a 2025 referendum. Second, allow New Yorkers to vote on the Council’s proposal to expand advice-and-consent this fall.

As for the Commission’s initial proposals, detailed in last month’s Preliminary Report, I am alarmed by several aspects of its recommendations.

First, the report suggests changes that would undercut the Council’s ability to legislate. In the name of “budgetary efficiency” and “fiscal responsibility,” the report proposes Charter revisions that would give the Administration unwarranted influence over how the Council assesses the impact of its legislation on city finances. But existing rules already require the Council, through its Finance Division, to consider effects on the City budget and prepare a fiscal impact statement. If adopted, the Commission’s recommendation would significantly curtail the Council’s ability to act independently. Because I believe checks and balances are important, and the Council should retain this power as part of its lawmaking authority, I urge the Commission to reject this proposal.

Second, the report suggests expanding the Department of Sanitation’s authority to “enforce cleanliness rules on all city property,” including enforcement against street vendors. As a champion of the Street Vendor Reform, I oppose broad expansion of DSNY’s authority without a comprehensive overhaul of the rules that govern — and, too often, unjustly punish — street vendors, our city’s smallest small businesses. Our office remains committed to working alongside a broad range of stakeholders to advance this desperately needed systemic change that will address conflict conditions on our streets. Vendors deserve to support their families without fear and we all deserve a fair and functioning system that fairly governs how we share our streets and sidewalks. The Preliminary Report fails to consider the issue holistically and so, for that reason, I urge the Commission to reject this proposal.

Finally, let me address those who wish to use the Charter revision as an opportunity to repeal New York City’s long-standing sanctuary city laws. Proponents of repeal have spread harmful misinformation and cynically appealed to the language of public safety to justify their arguments. But in districts like mine, and for immigrant communities throughout the city, these laws provide vital protections that keep our communities whole. Crucially, they allow undocumented New Yorkers to call emergency services when something goes wrong without fear of being turned over to ICE. Although the Commission’s report did not mention repeal of these policies by name, I urge you to reject any changes that will destabilize immigrant communities in the name of “public safety.”

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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