



Old Astoria Neighborhood Association (OANA)
www.OANA-NY.org

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Reforming NYC Community Boards

By Richard Khuzami

New York City's community boards were created to give neighborhoods a voice in how the city is planned, built, and served. They review land use proposals, advocate for better parks and transit, and weigh in on everything from sanitation to public safety. In theory, these boards represent grassroots democracy. In practice, their internal structure often concentrates power and discourages meaningful dissent.

The problem lies not only in how community board members are selected, but in how authority is exercised once they are appointed.

Community board members are not elected by the public. They are appointed—up to 50 per board—by the Borough President, with input from the local City Councilmember. While most members serve with integrity, the process is inherently political and largely opaque. Once seated, board members elect a Chair, who then has broad authority over committee assignments and committee leadership.

That is where the real imbalance begins.

Committees are where the substantive work of community boards takes place. Whether focused on parks, public safety, or land use, committees review proposals, hold hearings, and shape recommendations to city agencies. Yet there is no requirement that committees reflect the range of views held by the full board. A Chair can assign only like-minded members to key committees, sidelining dissenting voices and creating the appearance of consensus where none may exist.

Based on publicly available Queens community board bylaws, Chairs are generally vested with the authority to appoint committee members and committee chairs, a structure that can concentrate power even when exercised in good faith.

We at OANA believe committee membership should reflect ideological balance, much as legislative bodies do. In the City Council or Congress, leadership cannot simply exclude minority viewpoints from committees without consequence. Those bodies recognize that representation matters where decisions are shaped, not just where final votes are taken.



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There is, however, an important distinction. Community board members do not run for office. They do not campaign on public platforms or declare formal political affiliations. As a result, it can be difficult to define what constitutes a “minority viewpoint” within a board.

That is why the gold standard for community board reform remains public elections. If members were elected, their positions on development, housing, open space, and public safety would be known. Voters could choose who represents them, and committee assignments could reasonably reflect electoral support for differing views.

But elections are a heavy lift. They would require a citywide Charter revision, new voting infrastructure, and likely formal involvement by political parties—changes that may be impractical or undesirable in the near term.

Fortunately, there is a more immediate and workable reform.

Community boards should adopt a proportional committee assignment system based on the results of Chair elections. If a Chair is elected with 60 percent of the vote and an opposing candidate receives 40 percent, then approximately 40 percent of committee seats would be reserved for members who supported the opposing candidate. This would ensure that differing perspectives—however informally aligned—are present at the table.

This proportional structure would apply for the Chair’s two-year term. Board members appointed in years without a Chair election could still be assigned to committees at the Chair’s discretion, but subject to Executive Committee approval to ensure fairness. The overall balance would remain anchored to the proportional outcome of the Chair election.

Committees should also elect their own chairs, rather than having them appointed by the Board Chair. Allowing committees to choose their leadership would encourage internal accountability and reduce the concentration of power in a single office.

These reforms could also reinvigorate competition for Chair positions. Too often, Chairs run unopposed—not necessarily because they enjoy unanimous support, but because challengers see no meaningful path to influence if they lose. Under the current structure, losing a Chair election often means exclusion from the committees where decisions are made.

A proportional assignment system changes that dynamic. Even candidates who lose would gain meaningful representation for their supporters, making contested Chair elections more likely and more consequential. Greater competition would bring transparency, debate, and accountability to board leadership.



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Is this a perfect solution? No. Ideological balance can still shift mid-term as new members are appointed. But the structure would reset with each Chair election, and any imbalance would be temporary. That tradeoff is worth the benefit of increased fairness and transparency in committee work—the engine of community boards.

We do not need to overhaul the entire system overnight. But modernizing how community boards function, particularly how internal power is distributed, is a realistic and achievable reform. It honors the purpose of community boards while ensuring they reflect more than just the voices closest to power.

New York’s neighborhoods are diverse. Our community boards should be as well.