



Old Astoria Neighborhood Association (OANA)
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Reforming NYC Community Boards

By Richard Khuzami

New York City's community boards are meant to give neighborhoods a voice in land use, public services, and quality-of-life issues. In theory, they represent grassroots democracy. In practice, their internal structure often concentrates power and limits meaningful dissent.

The problem is not simply who sits on community boards—but how authority is exercised once members are appointed.

Community board members are not elected. They are appointed by the Borough President, with input from the local City Councilmember. While most serve honorably, the process is inherently political and largely opaque. Once seated, board members elect a Chair, who typically controls committee assignments and appoints committee chairs.

Committees are where decisions are shaped. They review development proposals, hold hearings, and issue recommendations to city agencies. Yet committee membership does not have to reflect the range of views on the board. A Chair can stack committees with like-minded members, sidelining dissent and creating the appearance of consensus.

Based on publicly available Queens community board bylaws, Chairs are typically granted significant discretion over committee composition and leadership, a structure that can marginalize minority viewpoints.

Ideally, community board members would be elected. Elections would clarify where members stand on issues like housing, development, and public safety, allowing committee assignments to reflect voter preferences. But elections would require a citywide Charter change, new infrastructure, and likely party involvement—making them a long-term, not immediate, solution.

There is, however, a practical reform that can be implemented now.

Community boards should adopt proportional committee assignments based on Chair election results. If a Chair is elected with 60 percent of the vote and an opponent receives 40 percent, then 40 percent of committee seats would be allocated to members aligned with the opposing candidate. This ensures that differing perspectives are present, even without formal political parties or platforms.



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This proportional balance would apply for the Chair's two-year term. Members appointed between Chair elections could be assigned by the Chair, subject to Executive Committee oversight, while maintaining the overall proportional structure.

Committees should also elect their own chairs, rather than having them appointed by the Board Chair. This would promote accountability and reduce the concentration of power.

Such reforms would encourage real competition for Chair positions. Too often, Chairs run unopposed—not because they enjoy unanimous support, but because challengers see no path to influence if they lose. Proportional representation would change that dynamic, making leadership contests more meaningful and transparent.

This approach is not perfect, but it is fairer, more transparent, and achievable now. Community boards were created to reflect neighborhood diversity. Their internal structures should reflect that diversity as well.