Testimony of Mark Diller

Before the

New York State Independent Redistricting Commission

Wednesday, November 10, 2021

Honorable Members of the Commission:

My name is Mark Diller. I have called the West Side of Manhattan my home since 1976, except for a momentary excursion for which I hope to be forgiven.

While I currently serve as a member of Community Board 7/Manhattan (including two separate terms as its chair and multiple tenures as Chairs of standing Committees), and am a Commissioner on the New York City Civic Engagement Commission, the testimony I offer today is not in any way on behalf of either of those organizations, and reflects only my personal views.

I offer this testimony as a supplement to my written and oral testimony delivered on July 26, 2021, before the “letter” and “named” maps were available.

*Themes*

The two themes I hope the Commission and the Legislature will incorporate into all redistricting decisions are:

* To respect and keep together communities of common interest and shared concerns, especially when those experiencing such common interests and shared concerns have historically not had equivalent access to the benefits of governmental decision-making; and
* To avoid placing boundary lines in the middle of recognized geographical communities and to eschew attempting to bring together disparate geographical areas solely for the sake of making simpler geometric shapes.

*Letters Over Names*

The goals outlined above are better represented by the maps denominated by “Letters” than by “Names” as posted on the IRC website for each of the Congressional, State Senate and State Assembly Districts under review.

*Congressional District*

Proposed Map “J,” while of a decidedly unusual and perhaps convoluted shape, hews much more closely to the themes and goals of keeping together communities of common interest and concern than the alternative Maps labled “SouthMnhtn” and “NorthMnhtn.”

In particular, dividing the unified community of the Upper West Side in roughly its midpoint in the West 70s will separate residents who are otherwise unified in a single community School District, Community Board District, and one of only two NYPD Precincts.

Perhaps more importantly, this artificial boundary will separate NYCHA campuses including the Douglass Houses and Wise Towers and WSUR Brownstones (and neighboring buildings) from the Amsterdam Houses and Extension. Isolating Amsterdam Houses and Extension will deprive this important community of shared advocacy opportunities before a single group of electeds.

The slight modification I respectfully urge the Commission to consider is to further keep the West Side of Manhattan in a single Congressional District by extending Map “J” to West 125th Street West of Central Park. Doing so will unite the already common interests and experiences of the areas geographically known as the Upper West Side and Morningside Heights, and will add the NYCHA Grant Houses to the coalition of shared advocacy needed by our neighbors in public housing.

The Congressional District proposed in Map “J” continues the uniting of communities of faith and economic circumstance which have been well served for the last decade and beyond in very similar configurations. In contrast, the “Names” maps for Southern and Northern Manhattan seek to unify the disparate populations and communities of the Upper East and Upper West Side for no discernable purpose other than to create pleasing geometric shapes. In context, while simplicity is often a virtue, it should not come at the expense of uniting on a map what decades of experience could not, at the expense of separating what history has shown to be unified.

The West Side of Manhattan, including the areas comprising the Upper West Side, Hell’s Kitchen, Clinton, Chelsea, the West Village and Tribeca, have distinct and separate characters and identities from the areas such as the Upper East Side, East Midtown, Murray Hill, Turtle Bay and the Lower East side. Although as the crow flies they might be considered proximate, the history, character, needs and experiences of the West and East Sides are demonstrably different, and deserving of representation that understands and embraces those differences while working to ensure a more just and equitable society for all. The differences in Community School Districts and the experience of parents add to the separate characters of these areas, which the IRC should respect. Even the built fabric and historic and architectural styles of those areas call attention to the differences that have defined those separate areas for generations.

Parents, Administrators and Teachers on the West Side of Manhattan, for example, have been leaders in fighting for greater equity and inclusion in our City’s public schools, often taking bold action that seeks to counter the Citywide trends that perpetuate isolation and disparity of access to resources. While other communities have taken similar actions, the historical context and current conditions on the West Side present distinct and troubling challenges from those experienced elsewhere. Those advocates deserve the singular focus and attention of their electeds.

It is a bedrock principal of the Upper West Side Community, and indeed of all of our City, that the benefits, resources, services and advantages of our City be universally and adequately available and equitably allocated. From affordable housing to addressing food insecurity to equitably resourced public schools to meeting the needs of our most vulnerable neighbors to the myriad lessons about the disparities in health care and social services taught by the Pandemic, the goals of diversity, equity, inclusion and the celebration of our multiple identities and singular community must be reflected in the way we draw District lines. These goals will not be advanced by uniting the Upper East and Upper West Sides into an even bigger District characterized by large swaths of affluence in which pockets of need are isolated.

Instead, Map “J” unites communities across the rainbow, and across lines of ethnicity, sexual orientation, income, and immigration experience that is more deserving of connection and unification.

Tourism is one of the pillars of the City’s economy, and the performing arts and the hospitality industry are in turn indispensable key elements to the recovery of tourism. While every section of Manhattan and our City must play its part in restoring tourism, including in-person performing arts and cultural events, and the dining, entertainment and lodging facilities without which no one would patronize the arts, the West Side of Manhattan is the home of the lion’s share of the theaters, concert halls, and intimate performance venues that have no parallel elsewhere in the Country. Meeting the unique and changing needs of the performing arts community and the hospitality industry require a singular focus that would not be well-served by elected officials who must advocate for them among a chorus of other needs and voices, or by splitting those arts and cultural communities into northern and southern geographic Districts that would splinter the advocacy needed to sustain them.

For all these reasons, I respectfully urge the IRC and the Legislature to adopt Congressional Map “J” over the competing “Names” maps that would divide my community.

*New York State Senate*

I am grateful that both proposed maps end the inclusion of my portion of the Upper West Side in a Senate District that primarily serves portions of the Bronx and the Upper East Side. Each of those vital communities deserves its own voice and advocacy, and pressing them into a single Senate District divides that voice to the benefit of no one and to the exhaustion of the wonderful elected who attempted to pay attention to such a far flung constituency.

That said, Map “AF” does a far better job of keeping united the communities of interest of the Upper West Side than the “Midtown” counterpart. Dividing the Upper West Side in the low West 80s fails for many of the reasons cited above relating to Congressional Map “J.” Even the name speaks to the reasons not to accept the “Names” map – Upper West Siders would not identify as residents of midtown, whose School Districts, commercial-to-residential balance, and built fabric are markedly different and a source of local distinction and pride.

In particular, Upper West Siders are proud of the historic character of the build fabric in their neighborhoods, characterized by mid-block Brownstones and townhouses, with classic apartment buildings along the avenues. The consistent density of the built environment and the early 20th Century focus on muted ornamentation and form stand in stark contrast to the late 20th Century modern character of midtown. Both have their strong supporters and charms, but that shared zeal is no reason to force together what each has been fighting to keep separate.

As with the Congressional Districts, my sole modest respectful suggestion is to continue Map “AF” north to at least West 110th Street, and preferably to include all of Morningside Heights, for all the reasons outlined above.

*State Assembly*

The “UprWstHlsKch” map would seek to merge the Upper West Side with a large swath of Clinton in West Midtown. This makes no more sense in connection the themes and goals espoused above than it would with respect to the Congressional and Senate Districts. The

While Map “BO” would divide the naturally unified Upper West Side at its logical and traditional midpoint, it would not further attempt to force a merger with the entirely distinct character, Community School District, police precinct, or other characteristics of the West Midtown area. Each deserves the unified focus of a local Assembly leader.

In addition, Map “BO” incorporates the southern portion of Central Park, which makes enormous sense given the importance of this individual scenic landmark to the surrounding communities. The pandemic taught us all the over-arching importance of viable, properly maintained and adequately staffed public parks and spaces, and the historical as well as programmatic significance of the Park to the Upper West Siders who rely on it on a daily basis is appropriately included in their Assembly District.

As with the Congressional and Senate Districts, I respectfully recommend that District “BO” be extended to the north to the extent possible to unify as much of the Upper West Side as possible in a single District.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to provide testimony relating to these important issues.

Respectfully submitted,

Mark Diller