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New York State Independent Redistricting Commission

Dear Commissioners:

Thank for allowing me to speak to you through this medium of written commentary. I am a resident, taxpayer and voter in the 4th Assembly District and I urge you to protect the community of interest known as Gordon Heights. It is critical that there be a racial justice review during this process so that systemic dilution of the Gordon Heights community and its electoral voice is not continued.

The redistricting proposal appears analogous to the location of high speed roads through the middle of thriving Black communities, thereby disrupting those communities and stopping their forward progress, financially, socially, educationally, and electorally.

I urge you to seize this opportunity to take a stand in favor of strengthening the voices of members of communities of color by enabling them to vote in the local and state elections in districts which do not diminish their voices and votes.

In addition, the entire Town of Brookhaven needs to remain in the same Congressional District, for many of the reasons that Gordon Heights should not be split.

I trust that you have considered the other testimonies that present the history of Gordon Heights and the importance it has played in our area. For your convenience, I attach a copy of the information for your review.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

S. David Smith

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History of community of interest that is Gordon Heights, established in 1927.

Gordon Heights is a historical African American community forged out of the vision of a developer Louis Fife, to design a community to meet the needs of African American middle class evolving in the early 20th century.¹ The origins of African Americans living in Brookhaven as a collective community dates back to the 1600s, when displaced African American slaves and indigenous population from the Setalcott nation settled in Setauket- Laurel Hill area of Brookhaven Town.² This community eventually formed Bethel AME Church in Setauket 174 years ago thereby creating a cultural and racial community, which in 2017 named, US National Register of Historic Place.

Louis Fife acquired several parcels of land, between the years 1928-1954 in Brookhaven Town from early settlers land owners such as Albert Overton, to expand the Gordon Heights. The expansions led to the systematic disenfranchisement of this community of interest – for example, Gordon Heights has 4 zip codes, making extremely hard to collect health, housing, crime and demographic data; Gordon Heights developed without an incorporated village, so that no fire department of the four zip codes would serve this community, and had to petition for a fire department charter 1947³; and community services for this community of interest were based upon property taxes, without commercial zoning to support a fire department and ambulance services.

Equally, if not more, egregious has been the “cracking” of Gordon Heights and the continued altering of its election districts. In 2011, the 2011 NYS Assembly redistricting reapportioned ED 192 directly down the center of a historical community, separating the eastern side of Gray Avenue to Granny Road and West Bartlett-Mill Road to the region of Yaphank to NYS Assembly District 3. This redistricting weakened the community’s vote and ability to advocate for itself and to receive its fair share of funding for services. Gordon Heights’ residents must now advocate to two Assemblymen, in AD 4 and AD 3, to implement matters of this community of interest. This is despite the fact that AD 4 is 4.1% smaller than the average population for an AD (129,147 vs. 134,675, a 5,528 person difference).⁴ By comparison, the total number of registered voters in Gordon Heights is 4,419: 2,830 of those voters are in AD 4 (EDs 137 and 200), with the remaining 1,584 voters in AD 3 (ED 192).⁵ Making Gordon Heights whole again by adding it to AD 4 is the right path forward, especially given the smaller relative size of AD 4 compared with the average AD.

¹ www.gordonheights.net

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bethel-Christian_Avenue-Laurel_Hill_Historical_District

³ www.gordonheights.net

⁴ www.redistrictingandyou.org

⁵ www.nyirc.gov/maps

I propose to the Commission the following recommendations:

1. **Maintain the Electoral Integrity of Gordon Heights Community of Interest.** The EDs in Gordon Heights, including EDs 137, 192, and 200, must be kept in the same Assembly District, specifically AD 4. This would preserve this community of interest, and would re-join the Gordon Heights community with the African American and indigenous Setalcott community of Setauket-Laurel Hill in the northern part of AD 4. Keeping ED 192 separate from EDs 200 and 137 would continue the disenfranchisement voting strength of the African American community of Gordon Heights. Additionally, EDs 218 and 275 both border Granny Road on the southern border of AD 4 and should also be included in AD 4.
2. **Expand AD 3 into AD 1.** AD 1 has 151,053 people, making it 12.2% larger than the average AD (151,053 vs. 134,675). AD 3, by comparison, is 128,374 people, or 4.7% smaller than the average AD (128,374 vs. 134,675). AD 1 abuts the eastern border of AD 3, and given the large size disparity, AD 3 should be increased based upon the very large population in AD 1.

The consequence of not fixing the problem of not allowing EDs 137, 192, and 200 to be a part of Gordon Heights in Assembly District 4 perpetuates a systematic disenfranchisement of a historical African American community. Righting this historical wrong, finally, would allow this community of interest that is Gordon Heights to be united, and to advocate and vote as a community to enjoy the full benefits and rights that come with an undiluted vote and a united voice. Allowing Gordon Heights to be in the same AD as the Setauket-Laurel Hill community in the northern portion of Brookhaven Town would restore these historically-linked communities and to amplify the voice of these communities of interest.