



TAKING OUR SEAT

Testimony of John P. Albert
Taking Our Seat

Before the New York State Independent Redistricting Commission
Wednesday, November 17, 2021

My name is John Albert with Taking Our Seat, we are a South Asian, Queens-based demographic data collection and advocacy organization focused on informing the redistricting process. This is Taking Our Seat's second redistricting cycle and personally, my third. We are proud to be members of the APA Voice Redistricting Task Force and a member of the South Queens Redistricting Coalition.

Taking Our Seat and our community partners were deeply engaged in the process that the IRC outlined to draw the first set of maps. We educated and organized our community about redistricting and the promise that the IRC process held to draw equitable lines. Historically, our communities have not had a meaningful voice in the process and the IRC's approach was one that we were heavily invested in.

To our dismay, when the IRC released its initial set of maps, there were in fact two sets of maps, the 'letters' and 'names' plans. The fact that there were two sets of maps confused the community immediately. What we understood to be a process where one draft map plan would be released and then the community could suggest changes became less linear. The true hard work of reconciling the two maps was left to the public. It made an already esoteric issue more difficult for lay people to understand and more importantly to trust. The real result was that your approach sowed cynicism.

Our focus areas were the neighborhoods of Richmond Hill/South Ozone Park and a part of Queens that we call the Hillside Ave corridor. The current Assembly configuration of Richmond Hill is now synonymous with gerrymandering, being home to seven districts. A great New York Times article was written recently about this area. The neighborhoods that count Hillside Avenue as their main thoroughfare don't do much better, just look



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at the way the current Senate lines between districts 11 and 14 snake through the area turning at almost every block.

There are elements of the 'letters' plan that we like but it is not a comprehensive solution at both the Assembly and Senate level. While Assembly districts AL and X are promising, the Senate districts that cover the same areas do not adhere to the communities of interests that we have outlined and have advocated for. Its almost like those same communities became meaningless in formulating Senate lines.

The 'names' plan maps are brutal in their efficiency. All districts are treated the same and the letter of the law upheld for racial make-up and deviation. Unfortunately, these maps don't take into account a very simple constituency, people. These maps too are not workable.

Since the IRC was unable to come to a consensus and in the interim a viable proposal has been presented, Taking Our Seat is here to support the Unity Map proposal. This formulation of AALDEF, the Center for Law and Social Justice and Latino Justice, is the best for our communities of interest in the both the Senate and the Assembly. We urge you to vote on the Unity Map plan and make it the one plan that you move forward to adoption.

The redistricting commission can still help correct the long-standing dilution of our community. The neighborhoods of Richmond Hill and South Ozone Park have sufficient population and a common community identity rooted in the Indo Caribbean immigrant experience to draw Assembly and Senate districts. Those neighborhoods should be kept together and whole. The neighborhoods East of the Van Wyck that traverse both sides of Hillside Avenue have their own identity. They are distinct and can be kept substantially whole. The Unity Map accomplishes both. Please support the Unity Map as we do.

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