My name is Vijay Sookai and I am a member of South Queens Women’s March (SQWM). I currently work as a medical scribe, and I live in South Richmond Hill, near the South Richmond Hill – South Ozone Park border. I have concerns regarding how the Richmond Hill, South Ozone Park, and Ozone Park neighborhoods are gerrymandered. This gerrymandering results in many of my neighbors and loved ones feeling like they don’t have a real impact in their local government, and that the government is not truly working for us. My neighborhood is home to a vibrant and widespread Asian American population, with many hailing from South Asia. This includes Punjabi and Indo-Caribbeans. Census data unfortunately does not fully account for the large number of Asian Americans in this area, where we know many undocumented people live.

Looking at the district lines, from local and state, to federal, you will notice a disregard for the natural communities of interest that exist. The district lines do not uphold the Voting Rights Act. At the State Assembly Level, our community of interest is divided into at least 7 districts – Assembly districts 23, 24, 27,28, 31, 32, and 38. We are also divided into several districts at the State senate level. The ways that the lines have been drawn divide and dilutes our ability to have a stronger and unified voice.

SQWM puts a great emphasis on building political power within the community, but if our community members know that even if they show up to the polls in large numbers, they have no chance of electing the candidate of their choice. What reason is there to be politically active and engaged in civics then?

The community of interest we are addressing is distinct from the areas its pieces are divided and put into. Examples are Howard Beach to the south, Jamaica, and St. Albans to the east, or Glendale and Maspeth to the north. We have one of the largest concentrated immigrant communities in all of NYC, but South Asians and Indo-Caribbeans, including vast numbers of Guyanese, Trinidadian, and Punjabi community members have no real representation in the local, state, or federal level because our community is artificially splintered by district lines. When a naturally occurring community of interest like ours is divided like this, elected officials do not have the kind of vested interest in serving us because we are reduced to a small fraction of their constituency in the areas they represent.

This splintering affects us because it leads to community issues not being addressed adequately if at all. Right now, we struggle with sanitation deficiencies. I have seen the amount of public garbage bins dwindle over the years and my community members aren’t given guidance as to how to properly leave personal household garbage out given that Liberty Avenue is a buys area, lined with small businesses. During the COVID-19 pandemic we were one of the hardest hit neighborhoods because of how many of us are public-facing essential workers. COVID-19 testing capabilities in my neighborhood were severely lacking as late as November 2020. We also received little support when the COVID-19 vaccination rollout began. For 1 month, the closest vaccination sites to my neighborhood were Hillcrest High School and August Martin High School. There weren’t enough slots for my community members to have for the longest. We have a housing crisis where people are getting priced out of becoming homeowners, and people live in basement apartments because there is nowhere else to go. If communities of interest were kept together, we would be able to advocate more effectively to address current issues, and could have had an impact when things were most dire during the pandemic in late 2020 through early 2021.

I believe the Unity Map, proposed by the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) will more accurately reflect my natural community of interest and preserves the political power of the Black community in the surrounding areas as well. The boundaries proposed by the Unity Map at all levels of government are the best possible solution for ensuring equity four our Asian American South Queens population while making sure the voices of other minority populations remain strong and whole. I am asking the commission to advocate for the Unity Map in the South Queens area.

My main request of you all is that you KEEP RICHMOND HILL, SOUTH OZONE PARK, AND OZONE PARK WHOLE.

Thank you to the Commission for giving us this platform to voice our concerns.

Our voice is our Power.