

Testimony: New York City Council joint hearing before Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries & International Intergroup Relations and Committee on Small Business discussing New York City's Cultural Sector and Derivative Businesses.

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Chairmember Van Bramer, Chairmember Reyna, and members of the City Council. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of naturally occurring cultural districts and their crucial importance within and across the communities of our City.

Good morning. I am Betsy Imershein, a member at large of NOCD-NY; a consultant working in the neighborhoods of NYC, involved in community, economic and cultural development. Additionally, I am an artist: having worked in and been a producer of non-profit theatre in NYC for many years and a photographer, with 10 published children's books.

I tell you all of this to explain the breadth of my experiences related to the issues that brought us here today and to highlight the importance of areas that support the creative economy and naturally occurring cultural districts.

A few short stories:

Working with Fourth Arts Block (FABnyc) for several years, one of only two formally designated cultural districts in NYC and a member of NOCD-NY, I have repeatedly heard from City agencies that they don't know what to do with us ... why don't we become a BID? There are potentially several answers to that question, but the simplest is that we can't, two thirds of the property owners in the district are non-profit entities.

Launching and directing the Maspeth Industrial Business Zone in 2006, one of my chief responsibilities was advocating for the over 550 industrial and manufacturing companies in my zone. That advocacy took many forms, and during my tenure, one of the ongoing issues I had to deal with was the illegal conversions of manufacturing space for artist use, both residential and workspace. Another component of that advocacy was a recognition of the breath of creative industries existing and expanding in the zone.

Working on a project in Long Island City a few years ago, an executive director of one of the large arts organizations in the area told me that their work was intertwined with over 80 businesses in the surrounding community. Isn't that amazing? Over 80 commercial and industrial businesses! And she didn't know how they could produce their work and function without them ... all this being said through a prism of her concern that the industrial businesses were being pushed out

... because of development, higher land values and therefore, rents that are increasingly unaffordable.

Moving forward:

Strengthen NOCD activity and neighborhood-based economies by incorporating formal recognition with equitable funding. What can be learned from BIDS, merchant associations, historic districts to successfully implement this?

Stabilize current manufacturing areas and continue to provide funding for ongoing development of affordable manufacturing space for businesses and creative industries. Create and convene interagency stakeholders with a focused agenda and a clear blueprint to support the needs of manufacturing businesses and artists, so that they no longer compete for the limited affordable spaces and resources in their neighborhoods. Support neighborhood-based cultural clusters and networks.

Thank you.