



Testimony of Brendan Cheney, New York Housing Conference Gowanus Rezoning

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Good evening. My name is Brendan Cheney. I am the director of policy and communications at the New York Housing Conference (NYHC). NYHC is a nonprofit affordable housing policy and advocacy organization. As a broad-based coalition, our mission is to advance City, State and Federal policies and funding to support the development and preservation of decent and affordable housing for *all* New Yorkers.

The city desperately needs more affordable housing and policies that will reverse and repair our history of racial discrimination. Rezoning high-income neighborhoods while requiring affordable housing development can help achieve both goals. The city must also commit to funding repairs at public housing developments. We therefore strongly support the Gowanus rezoning, as long as it includes a dedicated capital commitment for repairs and upgrades at local NYCHA residences Wyckoff Gardens and Gowanus Houses.

As we emerge from the COVID pandemic, New York is facing an ever-growing housing crisis. Homelessness continues to accelerate, as it has under every mayor since Ed Koch. Housing capital repair needs at NYCHA total \$40 billion¹ – a figure that is only growing. Finally, nearly 1 million New Yorkers are rent burdened, paying more than 30% of their income on rent. It is an unsustainable situation.

The pandemic has underscored the importance of housing for the health and safety of every New Yorker. Even though our state has enacted some of the strongest eviction protections in the country, an estimated 1 million renter households are at risk of eviction statewide, collectively owing more than \$2 billion in back rent.² Luckily, many of these households will be eligible for federal aid that began distribution this month, but that aid will not fix our underlying problem, which is a dire shortage of affordable housing.

The City's actions in the Gowanus Neighborhood Rezoning will map Mandatory Inclusionary Housing throughout much of the rezoning area, requiring that 25% to 30% of residential development be affordable to households making between an average of 60% of AMI to 80% of AMI, or between \$64,440 and \$85,920 for a family of three (in 2021). The city estimates that this will generate roughly 3,000 units of desperately needed affordable housing.

We need affordable housing in all neighborhoods, but bringing affordable housing to this neighborhood is particularly important, as it would help make it more economically and racially diverse. While residents in most other major City-led rezoning areas are at least 80%

¹ <https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/nycha-needs-40-billion-in-extra-capital-new-boss-says/2259520/>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/01/nyregion/nyc-eviction-moratorium-shelters.html>

Latinx and/or Black, more than 50% of Gowanus residents are White/non-Hispanic. It is to our collective embarrassment that New York is the 4th most segregated city in America³, and we need to confront the legacy of redlining head-on to better align this city with our values. Zoning policy is an important tool in that fight.

Gowanus also has a higher median household income than the surrounding borough, unlike most other rezoning areas. Gowanus' median household income is \$106,749 while Brooklyn's median household income is \$62,050. Gowanus is therefore an ideal neighborhood for creating affordable housing opportunities in high income neighborhoods through residential rezoning.

These policies – asking every neighborhood to be a partner in creating affordable housing and upzoning in high-income neighborhoods – have wide appeal. Both were recommendations of the United for Housing coalition – a coalition formed by NYHC and joined by 90 partner organizations in New York City.

The two adjacent public housing developments – Gowanus Houses and Wyckoff Gardens – should also benefit from this plan with an upfront commitment to needed repairs. Preserving NYCHA is just as important as building new affordable housing.

While the affordable housing will provide tangible benefits for the people that get the housing, it will also create economic benefits to the community. Housing investment creates jobs and can spur needed economic recovery. Research has found that 100 units of affordable housing construction creates 230 jobs and \$46 million in economic activity, and the city, state and national economy need additional stimulus to recover from the recession.

Finally, it is important to note the extent of community involvement in this plan. An in-depth and inclusive community planning process was undertaken that produced the Gowanus Neighborhood Rezoning Plan, an opportunity to make significant investments that deliver tangible benefits to the community. And recently the community board voted to support the plan. This process not only recommends that this plan be adopted, but should be replicated in other neighborhoods in the city.

As the city's economy struggles to recover, opportunities like Gowanus rezoning can create needed affordable housing, unlock new tax revenue, refill the construction pipeline, and help local businesses. The New York Housing Conference supports this rezoning and funding for adjacent NYCHA sites.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

³ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/12/17/black-white-segregation-edges-downward-since-2000-census-shows/>