



Woodhaven Residents' Block Association

Established 1972

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Written Testimony of the Woodhaven Residents' Block Association Before the New York State Legislative Task Force on Demographic Research and Reapportionment Regarding the Proposed 2012 District Maps February 7, 2012

Thank you, Co-Chairmen Nozzolio and McEneny, and members of the New York State Legislative Task Force on Demographic Research and Reapportionment (LATFOR) for the opportunity to testify.

This testimony is being submitted by the Woodhaven Residents' Block Association (WRBA). The WRBA, now in its 41st year, works on behalf of the residents of Woodhaven, an approximately one-square-mile neighborhood in Queens. The WRBA serves as an advocate of Woodhaven residents, promotes neighborhood spirit by bringing together residents and local leaders, and seeks to engage all in the betterment of our community.

The WRBA strives to be responsive to the residents of Woodhaven. Our efforts take many forms: we are in regular touch with our elected officials to emphasize the importance of particular issues; we serve as a conduit with the local police precinct, Community Board, city agencies, and other organizations to help maintain the safety and quality of life in Woodhaven; we establish programs on our own to deal with problems such as the shortage of parking, the proliferation of graffiti, and the growing problem of abandoned houses; and we give residents a chance to speak up and be heard at our monthly town hall meetings.

We are testifying today for two reasons: one, to applaud your proposal to keep all of Woodhaven within a single Assembly district; and two, to urge you to reconsider your Senate maps that would carve up Woodhaven among three different state senators.

I. The Assembly District

For the past decade, over 99 percent of Woodhaven has lain within the same Assembly district. (Only one square block of the neighborhood currently lies outside the lines of the 38th Assembly District.) The new map proposed by LATFOR places all of Woodhaven within the same Assembly district. The WRBA

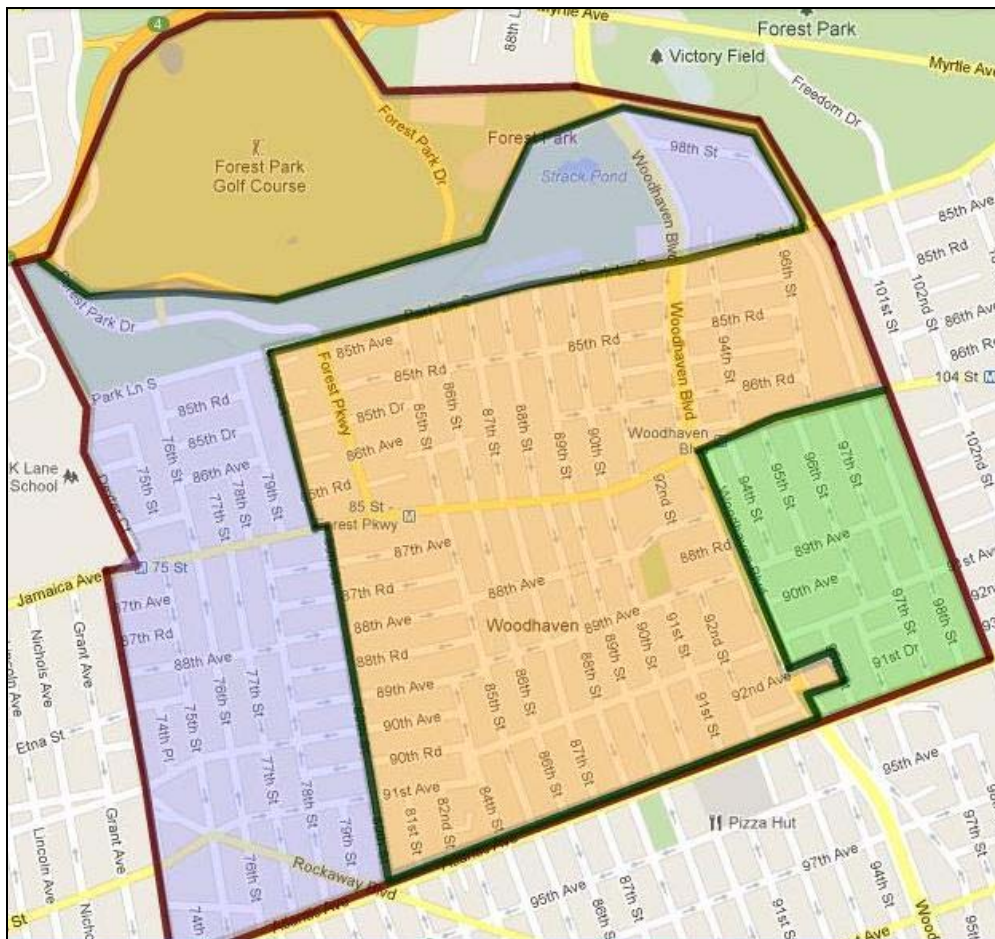
supports this proposal, which keeps our community whole and actually represents a small improvement over the existing lines.

Woodhaven is a cohesive community with a clear identity. The WRBA strives to maintain that cohesiveness. Having an assemblymember who understands the entirety of our community is crucial for our collaboration with him or her, and it also makes it far easier for that assemblymember to build and maintain a relationship with our whole neighborhood.

Thank you for proposing lines that support our mission of maintaining Woodhaven's relationship with its assemblymember.

II. The Senate Lines

Unfortunately, the proposed State Senate lines are an entirely different story. Woodhaven is already split between two state senators, which has proved to be unsatisfactory. LATFOR's proposed Senate districts would only compound the problem by splitting a one-square-mile neighborhood among three different senators. Here is a map representing how Woodhaven's Senate representation would be fractured under LATFOR's plan:



This delineation is bewildering and has no basis in the character, demographics, or needs of our community. When it comes to the Senate lines, the people of Woodhaven are being treated as pawns in Albany's gerrymandering games. The WRBA urges LATFOR to go back to the drawing board on these Senate lines and figure out a way to keep all of Woodhaven in one senator's jurisdiction.

There are five overwhelming reasons to rip up these maps and start over.

First, the proposed Senate lines fail to recognize that Woodhaven is a cohesive community.

The WRBA is very proud of its efforts to make Woodhaven a truly unified community—a “haven in the city,” as we call it. Part of having a cohesive community is that common issues affect the whole neighborhood, not just a fraction of it. When people in one part of Woodhaven experience a quality of life problem—be it noise, graffiti, a rash of car break-ins, or illegally posted signs—it is usually the case that the same problem has affected all of Woodhaven. When a city service fails to serve one part of Woodhaven—for example, during a tornado or a blizzard—it is usually the case that the rest of Woodhaven has also been under-served. When the city threatens to shut down a firehouse or a senior center in one part of Woodhaven, it becomes a major problem for all of Woodhaven. People from every corner of the neighborhood use the same buses, take the same subway line, shop at the same grocery stores, send their children to the same schools, play in the same parks, attend concerts at the same bandshell, face the same parking problems, and attend the same annual street fair. All of Woodhaven is served by the same police precinct and the same Community Board. It only makes sense for all of Woodhaven to be represented by the same state senator, too.

Second, these lines will make it more difficult for fellow residents to know who's representing them and whom to ask for help.

Whenever redistricting occurs, some residents will be shunted into a new district with a new set of representatives. That is confusing enough on its own. But splitting up the neighborhood in this manner will multiply the confusion. We estimate that over half of Woodhaven residents would be represented by a senator who has never represented them before and who, quite possibly, they have never even heard of before.

As a result, it will become much more difficult for residents to know who is representing them in Albany. The proposed lines also throw up another roadblock to residents who need help with problems and are seeking constituent services. This is exactly the opposite of what LATFOR should aim to accomplish.

Third, the proposed Senate lines would dilute Woodhaven’s voice in the upper chamber of New York’s legislature.

Our neighborhood would become an orphan to three senators, rather than a priority to one of them. This bears a disconcerting resemblance to the notorious gerrymandering technique of “cracking”—spreading likeminded voters into different districts in order to reduce their electoral influence. We are not implying that Woodhaven is being targeted by LATFOR, but the outcome is the same: the voice of Woodhaven’s residents is diminished. Each senator who represents a chunk of Woodhaven will have less reason to think about our problems, less reason to take our phone calls, less reason to get in his or her car and drive a long distance to come to our meetings. Woodhaven has shown time and again (as a glance at the WRBA’s website indicates) that its strength comes from its unity—its residents’ willingness to band together. Rending our representation hurts our ability to be heard. To us, that is simply an unacceptable outcome.

Fourth, Woodhaven residents will be divided into districts based far from each other.

Some Woodhaven residents will be in the same district as Astoria—clear across the borough. Other Woodhaven residents will be in a district that stretches all the way out to Green Acres Mall in Nassau County. It is not inherently a problem for Woodhaven residents to be part of a district that spans a large distance. The problem is that three Woodhaven neighbors, all located within five blocks of each other on the same street, might end up represented by three different far-flung senators. Preserving the unity of the neighborhood would offset the problems of having a senator who does not reside in our community.

Fifth, the lines are contrived and convoluted.

Two of the three proposed districts that encompass parts of Woodhaven have been referred to as among “the 20 ugliest gerrymandered districts.”¹ Queens Councilman Peter Vallone Jr. described one of those districts as “something that looks like a baby alien popping out of a stomach.”² This is not merely a matter of aesthetics. All three districts are full of narrow corridors or remain contiguous only by stretching across uninhabited land. The only explanation for these features is to connect neighborhoods that would not otherwise be grouped together.

Consider the three proposed districts that would encompass parts of Woodhaven. The contiguity of Proposed Senate District 10 is maintained by

¹ Colin Campbell and Hunter Walker, “The 20 Ugliest Gerrymandered Districts,” *Politicker*, Jan. 27, 2012, available at <http://www.politicker.com/2012/01/27/the-20-ugliest-gerrymandered-districts-2/>.

² Peter Vallone, Facebook post, January 26, 2012, available at http://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=291429684246403&id=1401020077.

minuscule strips of land around John F. Kennedy International Airport and Jamaica Bay. Proposed Senate District 15 has three separate corridors that are one block wide or less. (Unfortunately, one of them is located at the northeast corner of Woodhaven.) Proposed Senate District 12 has four.

Woodhaven's location at the juncture of these three districts means that the neighborhood is not just split, but split bizarrely. The senator who would represent the extreme northeast corner of the neighborhood would also cover the southwest corner. Because that senator's district travels along the uninhabited Forest Park, he or she would not cover most of the people who live between those two corners. Forest Park, which is core to the identity of Woodhaven and has been the source of a great deal of community activism, is severed between two representatives. As the map above shows, the district covering the northwest corner of the neighborhood hooks around (via uninhabited forest) to the western and southern portions. It's enough to make one's head spin.

VI. Conclusion

We understand that LATFOR's job is a very difficult one. You have the unenviable task of drawing district lines that are fair and abide by all required laws, while also facing pressure from elected officials, interest groups, and an array of other stakeholders. We appreciate the hearings you have convened to receive public input. And we recognize that you will never be able to please everyone.

That said, Woodhaven is a textbook example of a community of interest. The neighborhood might be diverse in many respects, but its residents share common bonds in even more respects. Woodhaven is a cohesive community—and the WRBA will work hard to keep it that way. We sincerely hope that LATFOR will assist us in that mission by redrawing its Senate lines so that all of Woodhaven is served by a single senator, just as LATFOR has wisely decided to place all of Woodhaven within the same Assembly district.

Respectfully,

The Woodhaven Residents' Block Association

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