



Woodhaven Residents' Block Association

Established 1972

84-20 Jamaica Avenue, Woodhaven NY 11421

(718) 296-3735 info@woodhaven-nyc.org

www.woodhaven-nyc.org

March 7, 2012

The Honorable Roanne L. Mann
United States Magistrate Judge
United States District Court
Eastern District of New York
225 Cadman Plaza East
Brooklyn, NY 11201

Dear Judge Mann,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the congressional district lines you have proposed in your capacity as Special Master.

This letter 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 1.7-square-mile neighborhood in Queens. The WRBA serves as an advocate for Woodhaven residents, promotes neighborhood spirit by bringing together residents and local leaders, and seeks to engage all in the betterment of our community.

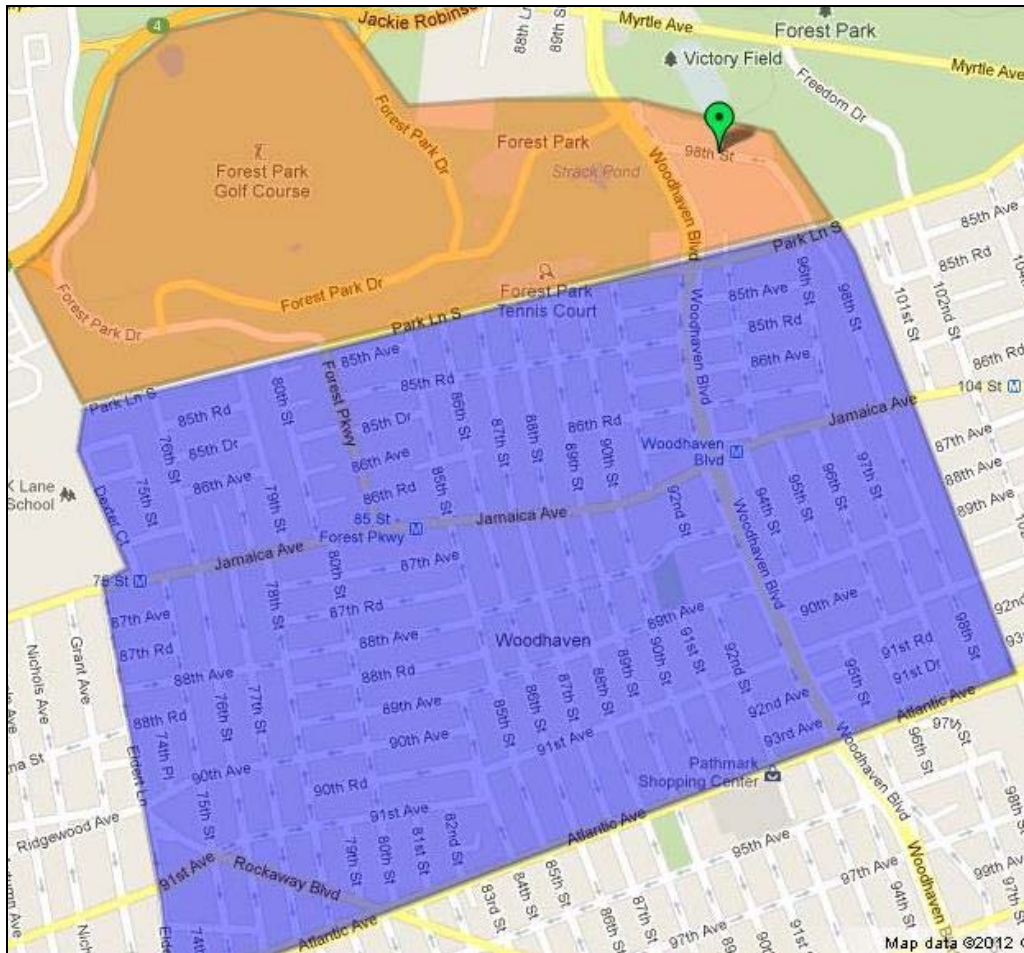
The WRBA strives to be responsive to the residents of Woodhaven. Our efforts take many forms: we are in regular touch with our elected officials at the city, state, and federal levels to emphasize the importance of particular issues; we serve as a conduit with the local police precinct, Community Board, government 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 would like to focus on your Proposed District 7, which encompasses most of the neighborhood of Woodhaven. We have two principal observations about this proposed district: first, it divides Woodhaven between two congressional representatives; and second, it separates Woodhaven from nearly all of Queens, placing it in a predominantly Brooklyn-based district that includes almost none of the neighborhoods with which Woodhaven has shared a congressional district for decades. Because of these facts, our main piece of feedback and our humble request is for you to redraw the district lines in a way that places the entirety of Woodhaven in a primarily Queens-based district.

I. Keeping Woodhaven Intact

Proposed District 7 places most of Woodhaven within the same congressional district. Unfortunately, however, two parts of Woodhaven would not lie within this district: the Forest Park Co-ops, and Forest Park itself.

The map below shows how Woodhaven would be split. The blue portion of Woodhaven would lie in Proposed District 7, and the orange portion of the neighborhood would be part of Proposed District 6.



The western segment of Forest Park makes up the majority of the orange portion. The Forest Park Co-ops, indicated by the green marker in the northeast quadrant of the map, would also be separated from the rest of Woodhaven.

Forest Park should be in the same district as the rest of Woodhaven. It is difficult to overstate how integral to the neighborhood's identity the park is. Woodhaven simply would not be Woodhaven without Forest Park. Numerous neighborhood events are held in the park. Local elected officials conduct services there. And the park is not without challenges that demand our elected officials' attention.

The WRBA has spent countless hours fighting to reopen the Forest Park Carousel, which is located there. We responded to an uptick in crime in the park by requesting a greater police presence there. The people of Woodhaven are the residents who know Forest Park and are pushing for its well-being. By placing the park in a different congressional district than the many residents who frequent the park and fight on its behalf, this proposal will result in a Member of Congress who is highly unlikely to be aware of the challenges, opportunities, and needs facing Forest Park.

This proposal also separates the Forest Park Co-ops, home to thousands of Woodhaven residents, from the rest of Woodhaven. This is a highly undesirable outcome because many of the issues that affect Woodhaven as a whole (e.g., crime, traffic along Woodhaven Boulevard, and whether to install a greenway or to activate a rail line along long-dormant train tracks in Forest Park) also intimately affect the Forest Park Co-ops.

At the WRBA's most recent Town Hall, on February 18, 2012, a very similar subject arose in discussion. The Forest Park Co-ops are currently represented by a different New York State Senator than the rest of Woodhaven. Everyone agreed that this arrangement is suboptimal. This State Senator is virtually never seen in Woodhaven. Neither she nor any of her representatives has ever shown up for a WRBA Town Hall or any other Woodhaven civic meeting. This is an unsurprising outcome because the Co-ops make up such a small portion of her district. Nonetheless, it severely damages the representation received by these residents. There is no need to make the inhabitants of the Co-ops orphans when it comes to their congressional representation too.

The proposed congressional lines fail to recognize that Woodhaven is a cohesive neighborhood. The WRBA is very proud of its efforts to make Woodhaven a truly unified community—a “haven in the city,” as we call it. As alluded to above, part of having a cohesive community is that common issues affect the whole neighborhood, not just a fraction of it. People from every corner of the neighborhood take the same subway line, shop at the same grocery stores, play in the same parks, attend concerts at the same bandshell (located in Forest Park), 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 Member of Congress, too.

In addition, the proposed congressional 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 representative. That is confusing enough on its own. But splitting up the neighborhood in this manner will multiply the confusion. It is possible that after the redistricting and upcoming elections, every single Woodhaven resident will be

represented by a Member of Congress 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 Washington, D.C. The proposed lines also throw up another roadblock to residents who need help with problems and are seeking constituent services—an important function of Members of Congress. This is exactly the opposite of what redistricting should aim to accomplish.

II. Keeping Woodhaven in Queens

Woodhaven is a neighborhood in Queens. Though it abuts Brooklyn to the west, there is no question that Woodhaven is part of Queens and has deep ties to other Queens neighborhoods.

The proposed district lines would place nearly all of Woodhaven in a predominantly Brooklyn-based district. Proposed District 7 spans three boroughs and takes in such neighborhoods as Williamsburg, Bushwick, Red Hook, and Sunset Park, as well as Chinatown and the Lower East Side in Manhattan. Ask any Woodhaven resident what they think of being grouped together with this set of neighborhoods and they would tell you that it makes very little sense, and that it would be far more sensible to group Woodhaven with other Queens neighborhoods.

Proposed District 7 includes almost none of the other neighborhoods with which Woodhaven has shared a congressional district for decades. The proposal places Woodhaven in a different congressional district than most or all of the nearby Queens neighborhoods of Richmond Hill, Glendale, Ozone Park, Middle Village, Kew Gardens, and Howard Beach. The proposed district appears to pay little heed to the neighborhoods with which Woodhaven shares a Community Board, a police precinct, a school district, bus lines, shopping strips, and countless other common elements.

(Stunningly, the proposed maps place most of Woodhaven, Richmond Hill, Glendale, and Ozone Park, respectively, in four separate congressional districts. Anyone who has ever spent any amount of time in these communities understands how closely connected they are and how little sense it makes to split them up four ways.)

It is hard to escape the feeling that Woodhaven is in some sense being singled out. No other Queens neighborhood has such a large proportion of its residents placed in this Brooklyn-based district.¹ And very few Queens neighborhoods are

¹ A significant proportion of Ridgewood and Ozone Park will also be included in proposed District 7, as will smaller fractions of Glendale and Richmond Hill. But in Woodhaven's case alone is the near-entirety of the neighborhood included in this district.

placed nearly *in toto* into any predominantly Brooklyn-based district.² This might be a simple accident of geography, but the drawing of district lines should be more sensitive to the borders of neighborhoods and the reality of the people who live within these districts.

For someone to draw district lines while blinding oneself to political realities is also to perform a disservice to the ordinary residents who will have to live with those lines. There is ample evidence that county lines are important political fault lines as well; political party officials representing a particular county are more likely to be concerned about their own county than about others. This is compounded—as it would be in Proposed District 7—when a district is based mostly in one county and includes relatively little of another county.

This concern for one's own county is not unique to party bosses; it is also true of the Members of Congress themselves. One need look no further than Woodhaven to see this dynamic in action. In the status quo, part of western Woodhaven is represented by a Member of Congress whose district lies almost entirely in Brooklyn. These Woodhaven residents hardly ever see their Congressperson (or surrogates of this Congressperson), who basically never attends any WRBA Town Halls or other local Queens civic meetings. The proposed lines are very likely to turn the fate of western Woodhaven's congressional representation into the fate of *all* of Woodhaven's congressional representation.

Finally, we notice that Proposed District 7—which resembles a crooked boomerang—appears much less compact than many of the other proposed districts, including Proposed Districts 3, 4, 5, and 6. To the extent that compactness should be considered—and it should be, not least because it will bear upon a Member of Congress's ability to visit every part of his or her district regularly—Proposed District 7 seems to be problematically misshapen.

It will be extraordinarily difficult—and unlikely—for a member of Congress from this proposed district to represent Woodhaven well.

III. Conclusion

The WRBA has an extremely modest budget and consists entirely of volunteers. As a result, we simply do not have the resources to retain a lawyer or to spend a large amount of time proposing maps of our own, as many other organizations do. We sincerely hope that our message is not ignored as a result.

What we do have is many decades of experience as residents of Woodhaven and Queens. And this experience makes it overwhelmingly clear that the way

² Howard Beach appears to be encompassed by the Brooklyn-based District 8, and Ozone Park appears to be split between District 7 and District 8.

Woodhaven is included in Proposed District 7 makes little sense and will severely damage our representation in Congress.

The drawing of district lines should not be a mechanical process of number-crunching and ethnic balancing that ignores whether a neighborhood is divided, or whether neighborhoods with common interests or close ties are split up, or whether political realities make it highly unlikely that a community will receive the representation it needs.

We sincerely appreciate your hard work on a tight deadline. We understand that an exercise as complex as drafting district lines will never satisfy everyone. We also recognize that you are bound by laws, precedents, and other imperatives we might not fully comprehend. We humbly request, however, that you revisit the way your proposal treats Woodhaven. If your proposed maps become law, our neighborhood's representation will suffer. Please, redraw the district lines in a way that places the entirety of Woodhaven in a primarily Queens-based district.

Respectfully,

The Woodhaven Residents' Block Association

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