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Gale A. Brower, Borough President

August 27, 2018

Hon. Bill de Blasio
Mayor
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Dear Mayor de Blasio,

Some months ago, I initiated a Task Force to review the closing of the Rikers Island jail and the building or renovating of a new jail in Manhattan. A list of the members is enclosed; we have had three (3) meetings. At the July 11th meeting of the Manhattan Borough President's Closing Rikers Island Task Force, representatives from the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice (MOCJ) informed us of your aggressive timeline to close Rikers Island and build new borough-based facilities. We were not told then of the plan to include 80 Centre Street in the mix as a new jail, and that that the Manhattan Detention Complex (MDC) would be renovated for offices for the District Attorney of New York County and affordable housing. We were only told that the plans for all four borough facilities would be released as a draft scope in mid-August.

The representatives of Community Boards 1 and 3 and all of the elected officials were taken aback because once the scope is submitted, the community is not able to discuss a wide breadth of ideas because they are not in the scope. For instance, the community cannot advocate for affordable housing at 80 Centre, on top of the jail, as the submitted document does not consider this issue.

As you know, the community needs time to bring ideas to the table before a scoping draft is released. Earlier this year, we were informed that there were going to be public meetings in April 2018. When they didn't happen, we were given a new date of June 2018; again no meetings. These opportunities would have given the impacted Chinatown community and other stakeholders the chance to offer their suggestions on how to move this project forward. Your newly announced August 15th draft release excludes meaningful community input.

My office wholeheartedly believes that the closure of Rikers Island is a necessary step in creating a more humane and just New York City. The development of alternative sites must be done prudently, and the development of alternative sites in the densely inhabited lower Manhattan area is challenging. As we have discussed at Task Force meetings, it is hard to design and build in ways that make jails safer and more humane, especially in a vertical building (with elevators) as opposed to horizontal, and to establish a strong level of community support at the beginning of the process. To accomplish this, you must consult with the community and have public meetings to obtain critical feedback on how to build a system that is restorative, rather than purely punitive.

When Mayor Koch first announced that the MDC would be expanded in Chinatown, the Chinese community staged historically large protests over the lack of proper engagement. The Chinatown community never received an adequate hearing, and we must make sure that history does not repeat itself. My office has held several meetings with stakeholders in Chinatown who expressed concerns regarding the lack of information they have received from this administration.

Our Task Force was created to properly address the concerns of all stakeholders. At one meeting, when the staff of the MOCJ asked who had been part of any discussions thus far, only one person raised a hand. It would have been better to schedule at least two hearings in every borough before moving forward so as to hear what the impacted communities have to say and to modify the scoping accordingly. Now we are aware of the September 27, 2018 hearing at 1 Centre Street, but you must schedule more meetings in Chinatown and a hearing (or two) in northern Manhattan.

I know that you always embraced community engagement and feel certain that you would want the community to be heard. The affected constituents of Chinatown and Lower Manhattan and northern Manhattan, as well as all of the borough, should be fully heard, and their views incorporated into the planning process.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gale A. Brewer". The signature is written in a cursive, somewhat stylized font.

Gale A. Brewer