

hairpCITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON SMALL BUSINESS

Jointly with the

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL
AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP
RELATIONS

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Wednesday, October 30, 2024

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COMMITTEE ROOM 14TH FLOOR

B E F O R E: Oswaldo J. Feliz, Chairperson
Carlina Rivera, Chairperson

COUNCILMEMBERS:
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Selvena N. Brooks-Powers
David M. Carr
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A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Calvin Brown
Deputy Commissioner
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Haris Khan
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Jane Carey
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Francine Garber-Cohen
President and Producer
The Regina Opera Company

COMMITTEE ON SMALL BUSINESS Jointly with the COMMITTEE ON
CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP
RELATIONS 4

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2 SERGEANT AT ARMS: We will begin shortly. Good
3 morning, good morning. Welcome to the hearings on
4 the Committee on Small Business and Cultural Affairs.

5 At this time, please silence all electronics and
6 do not approach the dais. I repeat, please do not
7 approach the dais. At this time, if you wish to
8 testify, please sign up a slip at the back of the
9 room, even if you signed up online.

10 If you wish to sign up online, you may do so at
11 testimony@council.nyc.gov. That's
12 testimony@council.nyc.gov. If you need additional
13 assistance, please contact the sergeant. Chair, you
14 may begin. Thank you, thank you so much.

15 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Good morning, everyone, buenos
16 dias. I am Councilmember Oswald Feliz, Chair On The
17 Committee on Small Business. Thank you for joining
18 today's hearing with the Committee on Small Business
19 and Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and
20 International Intergroup Relations to discuss our
21 oversight topic: public space activation and small
22 business revitalization in naturally occurring
23 cultural districts.

24 I'd like to begin by thanking Councilmember
25 Carlina Rivera, whom I have the honor and the

1
2 privilege of co-chairing this hearing with. I'd also
3 like to thank representatives from the
4 administration, members of the public, and of course,
5 my colleagues who have joined today in person and via
6 Zoom, including Councilmembers Carr, Brooks-Powers,
7 Hanks, and Hanif via Zoom.

8 Over the past four years, we've seen small
9 businesses face significant challenges. We've also
10 seen businesses respond to these challenges in unique
11 and inspirational ways. Recently, in fact, in New
12 York City, New York City celebrated the roughly
13 183,000 small businesses in our city. Even as we
14 celebrate this record new number of small businesses,
15 we must ensure that we continue to address small
16 businesses effectively and equitably.

17 At the Small Business Committee's hearing this
18 past April, we touched on a very important topic
19 facing the city: vacant storefronts and its effect on
20 public spaces and commercial corridors. This is a
21 huge challenge for our commercial corridors. Vacant
22 storefronts can be tied to limited foot traffic for
23 all the small businesses and concerns for public
24 safety.

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2 An existing solution to addressing the need to
3 revitalize commercial corridors is through the
4 infusion of arts and culture in business communities
5 and in public spaces. This city is home to a diverse
6 and incredible landscape of unique neighborhoods with
7 so much to offer, and the city can play an important
8 role in bringing together local businesses and
9 cultural organizations to activate and revitalize
10 local commercial corridors.

11 It's important to emphasize that when we talk
12 about small businesses and arts and cultures, these
13 are not separate communities. Many cultural
14 organizations are themselves small businesses, and
15 vice versa, from community theaters and art galleries
16 to coffee shops and restaurants. And they all have a
17 shared interest in activating public spaces in a way
18 that will attract foot traffic and enliven
19 neighborhood culture.

20 In fact, a look at the Department of Small
21 Business Services website shows a number of
22 commercial district needs assessments from all
23 boroughs that point to opportunities to infuse arts
24 and culture into public spaces as a part of improving
25

1
2 pedestrians' experiences and supporting local
3 businesses.

4 We've also seen a number of Business Improvement
5 Districts intentionally and successfully engage with
6 local artists, performers, and cultural organizations
7 to enrich commercial experiences, often through
8 public performances or artwork. So, many examples of
9 these activations of public spaces through the
10 intersection of small business and culture exist
11 across the city, from the Queens Night Market to the
12 Fun on the Fifth Festival in Bay Ridge, to the
13 Meatpacking District's Edward Hopper-inspired
14 exhibition, to the annual South Bronx Culture
15 Festival.

16 Many of the most successful examples arise
17 naturally from existing cultural networks that are
18 rooted in the unique history and communities of their
19 neighborhoods. City governments should celebrate and
20 support these naturally occurring cultural districts
21 and networks because they're engines of enduring
22 social and economic growth, and quite simply, they
23 make our city great.

24 In today's hearing, we seek to closely examine
25 these intersections of arts and culture, businesses,

1
2 and public space, and how these intersections can
3 revitalize a commercial corridor.

4 We look forward to hearing from SBS on how they
5 can support these areas of interest in all the
6 neighborhoods that want it, ensure these
7 opportunities are equitably accessible, and
8 facilitate coordination with other agencies to ensure
9 these opportunities are effectively enacted.

10 I want to thank Jessica Boulet and Rebecca
11 Barilla from central staff for putting this hearing
12 together, as well as my team, some which have joined
13 us, Santiago Baena and Miguel Pena, and everyone
14 working in the background to make this a reality.
15 Now I'll turn it over to my co-chair, Councilmember
16 Carlina Rivera.

17 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you, Chair Feliz.
18 Good morning, everyone. I am Councilmember Carlina
19 Rivera, Chair of the Committee on Cultural Affairs,
20 Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations.

21 We are pleased to join the Committee on Small
22 Business today to look at naturally occurring
23 cultural districts, and at how the Department of
24 Small Business Services and the Department of
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1
2 Cultural Affairs might work together to enrich the
3 quality of life in the city's neighborhoods.

4 In CreateNYC, the 10-year comprehensive cultural
5 plan that over 188,000 New Yorkers participated in,
6 that was adopted in 2017, two of the original eight
7 issue areas outlined are particularly relevant to our
8 hearing. One, neighborhood character, and two, arts
9 and culture in the public space.

10 Strategies that were identified in CreateNYC as
11 important for working on enhancing neighborhood
12 character included these: Support arts, cultural,
13 and science programs in all neighborhoods, in all
14 boroughs; raise awareness and promote belonging in
15 neighborhood art and cultural environments; ensure
16 that the support of neighborhood-based arts and
17 culture enables existing communities and cultures to
18 thrive in place; and strengthen and protect the
19 existing cultural infrastructure in New York City.
20 We can agree that those are all well worth doing.

21 Strategies that were identified in CreateNYC as
22 important for working on supporting arts and culture
23 in public space included these: Actively encourage,
24 support, and strengthen public spaces as vital places
25 for creative expression and community building; and

1
2 increase opportunities for artists to work in public
3 agencies and public space. That would cover the
4 Public Artist-in-Residence Program currently operated
5 by DCLA, which embeds artists in New York City
6 agencies to engage with civic issues, and the
7 Percents for Art Program, currently operated by DCLA,
8 which commissions artists to create artworks with a
9 budget taken from eligible New York City-funded
10 building projects. We can agree that those are well
11 worth doing too.

12 Both of those issues are now represented in
13 DCLA's Action Plan, adopted in 2019 to carry out the
14 goals of CreateNYC, and used since then to guide
15 DCLA's work. One critical objective in the Action
16 Plan is the very first one: Increase equitable
17 funding and support for culture, especially in
18 historically underserved communities.

19 We hope that we can hear about how naturally
20 occurring cultural districts can and do encompass and
21 nurture our historically underserved communities.

22 Another critical objective in the Action Plan is
23 this: Strengthen connections between the cultural
24 sector and government.

1
2 As representatives of our local government, we
3 are looking forward to hearing how we can strengthen
4 our connections to our incredible cultural sector. I
5 believe that we will also be hearing about some
6 exciting work being done by cultural organizations to
7 bring new resources and new ideas to our local
8 communities. I'm looking forward to that.

9 I want to, again, thank the Chair for his
10 leadership, and I want to acknowledge Councilmembers
11 Paladino and Williams, who have also joined us.

12 I want to thank the committee staff who put
13 together this hearing and who always do such a
14 brilliant job in preparing us as Councilmembers.
15 Cristina Yellamaty, the Committee's Counsel, Regina
16 Paul, the Committee's Policy Analyst, and Sandra
17 Gray, the Committee's Finance Analyst, and of course
18 my staff, Katie Loeb, my Chief of Staff, and Eddie
19 Amador, my Director of Communications and
20 Legislation.

21 Thank you, Chair Feliz. I'll turn it back over
22 to you.

23 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Thank you, thank you so much,
24 Co-Chair.

1
2 And I'll turn it to the Committee Counsel to
3 administer the oath before we hear from the Mayoral
4 Administration.

5 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Chair. Good
6 morning, everyone.

7 Welcome. I'm Jessica Boulet, Counsel to the
8 Committee on Small Business. Today, we will hear
9 testimony from the Department of Small Business
10 Services.

11 To start us out, joining us as panelists, we
12 welcome Calvin Brown, Deputy Commissioner for
13 Neighborhood Development for the Department of Small
14 Business Services, and Haris Kahn, Acting Chief of
15 Staff. If you could both raise your right hands,
16 please.

17 Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth,
18 and nothing but the truth before this committee, and
19 to respond honestly to Councilmember questions?

20 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: I do.

21 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: I do.

22 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Please begin when
23 you're ready.

24

25

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2 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: Good morning, Chair Feliz.
3 Good morning, Chair Rivera and members of the Small
4 Business and Cultural Affairs Committees. My name is
5 Haris Kahn. I'm the Acting Chief of Staff at the New
6 York City Department of Small Business Services. I'm
7 joined today by Deputy Commissioner Calvin Brown from
8 our Neighborhood Development Division.

9 SBS's mission is to create economic security for
10 all New Yorkers by connecting them to good jobs,
11 creating stronger businesses, and building thriving
12 neighborhoods.

13 Our teams work every day to make New York City
14 the best place for an entrepreneur to start, operate,
15 and grow their business. We're pleased to discuss
16 the ways in which SBS supports public space
17 activation and small business revitalization through
18 our agency's work.

19 During COVID-19, outdoor dining supported nearly
20 12,000 businesses, helping many survive the most
21 severe impacts of the pandemic.

22 Local businesses also benefited from patrons
23 frequenting open streets, pedestrian plazas, public
24 parks, and our neighborhood shops. Under the
25 leadership of First Deputy Mayor Torres-Springer, and

1
2 in collaboration with our partner agencies, SBS
3 delivered key initiatives in the mayor's Blueprint
4 For Economic Recovery over the past three years. We
5 launched the \$85 million New York City Small Business
6 Opportunity Fund, marking the largest public-private
7 partnership in city history aimed at supporting small
8 businesses.

9 The fund reached over 1,000 businesses citywide,
10 with 80% identifying as minority or women-owned,
11 empowering diverse entrepreneurs across New York
12 City.

13 SBS also initiated the NYC Best Business Express
14 Service Team, which has saved businesses over \$36
15 million in fines and fees. With support from the
16 City Council, we implemented over 100 reforms to cut
17 red tape for small businesses by creating first-time
18 warnings, cure periods, and removing outdated
19 mandates saving businesses over \$8 million annually.

20 SBS also introduced groundbreaking grant
21 programs, providing critical support to revitalize
22 neighborhoods and business corridors in every
23 borough. Today, New York City has more jobs and
24 small businesses than ever before, a record-breaking
25 4.7 million jobs and over 183,000 businesses.

1
2 Notably, one in every three small businesses has
3 opened within the past two years.

4 Our city's robust economic resurgence is
5 supported by the administration's laser focus on
6 public realm improvements to unlock economic
7 potential. Mayor Adams appointed Ya-Ting Liu as the
8 city's first-ever Chief Public Realms Officer,
9 charged with implementing City Hall's vision for
10 accessible, clean, and vibrant public spaces that
11 drive foot traffic to small businesses. In
12 supporting these efforts, SBS works alongside her
13 team, several city agencies, including Department of
14 Cultural Affairs, Department of Transportation,
15 Department of Buildings, Department of City Planning,
16 Department of Parks and Recreation, and the Street
17 Activity Permitting Office.

18 SBS also sits on an interagency capacity-building
19 task force with the Mayor's Office of Nonprofit
20 Services for city agencies that interact with
21 nonprofits.

22 DCLA, led by Commissioner Laurie Cumbo, has an
23 annual budget of over \$250 million to support over
24 1,000 local organizations. Many DCLA grantees
25 leverage their funding to energize public spaces with

1
2 vibrant events, such as the West Side Festival,
3 organized by the West Side Cultural Network in
4 partnership with the Meatpacking BID.

5 The Coney Island Mermaid Festival, another DCLA-
6 funded event, attracts hundreds of visitors to the
7 iconic boardwalk and supports businesses along
8 Mermaid and Surf Avenues.

9 SBS also plays a role in public space activation,
10 not only as a funder for community-based development
11 organizations, but also as a connector, a
12 facilitator, and an advocate for their needs across
13 city government.

14 Our Neighborhood Development Division, led by
15 Deputy Commissioner Calvin Brown, oversees New York
16 City's network of 76 BIDs, which themselves serve
17 nearly 300 miles of commercial corridors and invest
18 approximately \$200 million into our local economy.

19 And over the past three years, SBS has allocated
20 over \$35 million in grants to over 100 community-
21 based development organizations, supporting over 88
22 public space activations, among other revitalization
23 efforts.

24 We are proud of this historic infusion of funds
25 already resulting in the expansion of Long Island

1
2 City Business Improvement District, the creation of
3 the Cypress Hills BID, with a future East Harlem
4 125th Street BID and a Coney Island BID approaching
5 legislative review in the coming months.

6 Our grants also enable community-based
7 organizations to produce 39 commercial district needs
8 assessments, which study the existing business
9 landscape of a particular neighborhood through
10 merchant, consumer, and shopper surveys, as well as
11 an in-depth inventory of streetscape conditions.

12 Following the completion of these assessments,
13 SBS deploys neighborhood-specific interventions
14 through our grantees, our agency teams, and in
15 coordination with city agencies.

16 As an example, the Neighborhood Initiatives
17 Development Corporation, an Avenue NYC grantee for
18 FY25, will conduct a CDNA analyzing corridor
19 conditions around the East Tremont section of the
20 Bronx, providing recommendations based on community
21 feedback.

22 And this August, SBS's new commissioner, Dynishal
23 Gross, announced over \$650,000 in the first-ever
24 public realm grants to 10 community-based development
25 organizations across our five boroughs.

1
2 Our partner organizations will use this funding
3 to develop place-based projects, such as temporary
4 lighting installations, public art, wayfinding
5 signage, to direct visitors to important sites around
6 the neighborhood. This work builds on last year's
7 lighting grants, which led to almost \$1.7 million in
8 funding for 17 organizations. In Murray Hill,
9 Queens, Asian-American Federation launched their Find
10 Your Soul district marketing campaign with the
11 activation of an underutilized public plaza on Barton
12 Avenue.

13 The Asian American Federation hosted cultural
14 dance classes, a luncheon featuring local
15 restaurants, and a public photo exhibition on their
16 open street, and also commissioned a mural reflecting
17 the neighborhood's Korean culture. In North Shore of
18 Staten Island, La Colmena, one of the first public
19 realm grant recipients, plans to paint three murals
20 celebrating the strong Mexican and Italian heritage
21 presence along Port Richmond Avenue, from Anne Street
22 to Hooker Place this year.

23 In the Bronx, the 161st Street BID and the Urban
24 Design Forum have transformed Lou Gehrig Plaza with
25 seating, shade structures, and lighting. These

1
2 additions allow local organizations to host free
3 outdoor music performances and events, building a
4 stronger sense of connection for residents and
5 attracting more visitors to the neighborhood.

6 In Brooklyn, Arts Gowanus and the Gowanus Canal
7 Conservancy will develop the Gowanus Walkabout
8 program, a creative wayfinding initiative to promote
9 and support local businesses and culture during a
10 period of substantial neighborhood change. The
11 project will utilize site-specific and digital
12 signage designed by local artists to creatively
13 educate and guide visitors around the neighborhood.

14 As you can tell from some of these examples, our
15 FY25 allocation of \$7.3 million in city funding
16 provides critical support for cultural assets and
17 revitalizes our commercial corridors. While most of
18 our grant applications for this fiscal year have
19 closed, our Building Creative Capacity Grant in
20 partnership with the Van Allen Institute has a
21 deadline of November 15th. We encourage members of
22 the committee to encourage nonprofits in your
23 districts to apply.

24 Lastly, our programming goes beyond the public
25 realm itself and supports small community leaders as

1 well. SBS's Neighborhood Leadership Program, managed
2 by CORO New York, teaches management strategies to
3 emerging leaders. The program focuses on how
4 neighborhood leaders can support small businesses and
5 strengthen commercial districts through a cohort
6 model.

7
8 Since 2015, SBS has trained 274 leaders, and in
9 the past two years expanded eligibility intentionally
10 to include staff from cultural organizations.

11 SBS is committed to ensuring that small
12 businesses thrive in every commercial corridor and is
13 grateful for our partnership with sister agencies,
14 local community-based organizations, and the City
15 Council in this work. We look forward to discussing
16 ways to improve public space activation and
17 strengthen our local economy.

18 Thank you, and we're happy to answer any
19 questions you may have for us. Thank you, Chair.

20 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Thank you. Thank you so much
21 for your testimony and thank you so much for
22 everything that you and your team does on this issue.
23 We live in the most diverse city in the entire world,
24 and it's important that we help our small businesses
25 and small business corridors and regions show off

1
2 everything that they have to offer. So, thank you
3 for everything that you've done on that, including in
4 the region of East Tremont and the Bronx.

5 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: Thank you.

6 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: So a few questions about the-
7 - many questions, including about the different
8 initiatives and programs and grants available for
9 programs related to culture. But I guess I'll start
10 with, I guess, your approach to arts and culture as
11 part of the inclusive economic growth strategy.

12 So, a few questions on that.

13 How would SBS describe their engagement with arts
14 and cultural organizations?

15 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: Thank you so much,
16 Councilmember. We work with community-based
17 organizations across the city.

18 Now, some of them focus purely on merchant
19 organizing. Some of them do a blend of merchant
20 organizing, cultural activations, and arts. But what
21 you can tell from the testimony and what has happened
22 over the past two years: There's been an intentional
23 focus on making sure we are looking at the
24 intersection of art, culture, and economic
25 development, and that's why the city launched the

1 first-ever public realm grants. This is not
2 something that has happened in the past. It's
3 specifically designed to energize our corridors with
4 art installations and work that will beautify the
5 neighborhood.
6

7 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Okay. Does SBS have a
8 designated person or process that focuses on
9 identifying and mobilizing local cultural resources
10 to support small businesses?

11 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: So our entire division-- we
12 have a division of neighborhood development that's
13 led by Deputy Commissioner Calvin Brown. That
14 division, with approximately 27 employees, they're
15 focused on economic development at the local
16 neighborhood level. And I think, as is clear in most
17 of the work that we do, we do not see clear lines of
18 separation between some of this art installation,
19 some of the cultural work, the vibrancy in our
20 communities, the diversity in our communities, and we
21 know that the work of revitalizing commercial
22 corridors in of itself means revitalizing culture
23 around the city.

24 And so that team of 27 works tirelessly every day
25 on these issues.

1
2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: And I would just add,
3 Councilmember, that as part of our CDNA process, the
4 Commercial District Needs Assessment, organizations
5 that participate in that neighborhood assessment,
6 they do look at the other organizations, whether
7 they're arts and cultural institutions, that can
8 support the type of work that they're doing as part
9 of the assessment that they do.

10 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Okay. What type of outreach
11 does SBS conduct to ensure that local cultural
12 leaders are consulted and included in the efforts to
13 revitalize a local commercial district?

14 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: So most-- All of our grant
15 funding is community-led and community-driven. And
16 so the work of interventions that we see take place
17 as a result of SBS's funding, it is determined
18 inherently by community leaders and community
19 organizations.

20 One example of that, Councilmember, is when an
21 organization does a Commercial District Needs
22 Assessment. Beyond the fact that this organization
23 has decided they want to embark upon this work in
24 that neighborhood, the CDNA process forces them to do
25 merchant surveys, shopper surveys, consumer surveys,

1 really engage with the local stakeholders and
2 incorporate those insights into the final
3 recommendations that they produce as part of the CDNA
4 process.
5

6 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Has SBS noticed an interest
7 in bringing more art and performances to public
8 spaces to help revitalize our commercial corridors?
9 Commercial corridors, but also areas such as public
10 plazas next to commercial corridors and more?

11 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: Yes, and I think most New
12 Yorkers saw that interest just during the pandemic as
13 we saw the need to rely on public spaces, pedestrian
14 plazas, open streets, and many New Yorkers just
15 wanting to walk down their commercial corridors.
16 There's been tremendous interest in seeing art and
17 culture and just vibrancy back on our commercial
18 corridors. And that is why you're seeing an emphasis
19 by the agency over the past three years in really
20 focusing in on this intersection between arts,
21 culture, economic development.

22 We see it through not only this public realm
23 grant that is \$650,000, but beyond that, making sure
24 that all of our programming, wherever it makes sense
25 for a local community-based organization to do those

1 kinds of interventions, enabling them with the other
2 grants as well. They're not limited to the public
3 realm grant, but we're doubling down on it with this
4 initiative that the Commissioner announced in August.
5

6 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Okay, so what are different
7 grants or initiatives that would be useful to
8 activating public spaces?

9 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: So CBDOs, Community-Based
10 Development Organizations, we encourage them to apply
11 to our Avenue NYC grant, our Neighborhood 360 grant.
12 They can also apply to merchant organizing. And then
13 for some organizations and neighborhoods where they
14 feel the need to embark on a journey of BID formation
15 and BID creation, the administration, announced the
16 first-ever BID development grants.

17 The BID development grant might not be perfectly
18 suited for some of this work, but almost every other
19 grant is, and even in the BID development grant, part
20 of the deliverables are executing on a demonstration
21 project, and that could be a large-scale public space
22 activation, a street fair of sorts, a lighting
23 fixture of sorts. And so we don't see this work
24 siloed. This is all integrated into the vision of
25 our division and the grants that we issue, but we're

1
2 doubling down on it with this public realm grant that
3 we've allocated \$650,000, and we're spreading that
4 money to every single borough and with 10
5 organizations benefiting from this.

6 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: DCLA published a 10-year plan
7 called CreateNYC, as you mentioned earlier, which
8 sets several goals that ensuring that economic growth
9 in all neighborhoods is community-driven and
10 inclusive.

11 Has SBS ever been contacted by DCLA regarding the
12 parts of the Create NYC plan that touches on small
13 businesses?

14 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: So we work very closely
15 with the Department of Cultural Affairs, and that's
16 not just from the time of the CreateNYC plan. That's
17 an ongoing relationship. It's incredibly strong. We
18 have conversations with them from storefront vacancy
19 to even culture at risk, and when a nonprofit
20 organization, a cultural organization might be in a
21 difficult moment. Having-- Being able to sit on a
22 task force to do that work is important to us. We
23 sit on DCLA's culture at risk task force. We have
24 membership there, and it's open lines of
25 communication, and you can see there's overlap in our

1
2 work in some ways where we find some organizations
3 that may be doing very similar work that a DCLA
4 grantee might also be doing in a similar or adjacent
5 neighborhood. So, there's a very strong relationship
6 there.

7 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: When we're talking about
8 public spaces, including sidewalks but also public
9 plazas, these are things that are under the
10 jurisdiction of the Department of Transportation.
11 So, just curious, does SBS coordinate with DOT to
12 discuss how these spaces can be utilized by small
13 businesses to promote commercial and, I guess,
14 cultural activity?

15 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: Yes, we have close
16 relationships with the Department of Transportation,
17 also the Street Activity Permitting Office, which
18 plays a critical role here as well.

19 And on DOT, one example of how this intersection
20 of public space activation, small business, and the
21 DOT jurisdiction over the right-of-way, we were
22 involved with the Dining Out NYC programming, and our
23 food and beverage industry partnership team served
24 and worked closely with DOT in the rollout, making
25 sure that the perspectives of restaurant operators

1
2 and entrepreneurs were heard in the development of
3 the program's rollout as the permanent program
4 launched this year.

5 And we were just in-- actually in Elmhurst last
6 week with Commissioner Gross and Congressmember Grace
7 Meng, visiting businesses, making sure they knew
8 about the Dining Out program, as well as promoting a
9 grant program that we have for restaurants that are
10 transitioning into the permanent program.

11 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Okay. Is there anything that
12 SBS thinks DOT could be doing to make these public
13 spaces more accessible? Public spaces, including,
14 and especially our public plazas?

15 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: So, I mean, this
16 administration is really focused on making sure that
17 we address and streamline permitting challenges
18 across the board. Permitting is complicated and
19 complex for many CBDOs, and so that's why the mayor
20 appointed the first-ever Chief Public Realms Officer.
21 She has then issued a realm of possibility report
22 that lays out specific recommendations on
23 improvements to the complex permitting systems that
24 exist and the different scenarios that a CBDO might
25 need to encounter, whether they're organizing a

1 street fair or another type of activation on the
2 streets. And so we work closely with Chief Public
3 Realms Officer Ya-Ting Liu. We work with our
4 counterparts at DOT Street Activity Permitting
5 Office. And on SEPO in particular, when any of our
6 grantees are putting up high multi-block street fair
7 type activities, we work very closely with SEPO.
8

9 We inform them of these opportunities, these
10 events that are being planned. We try our best to
11 make sure anything that is possible on our site to
12 provide technical assistance to CBDOs in these local
13 communities, we do so and flag it for the relevant
14 counterparts at city agencies.

15 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Okay, very good. Okay, and
16 can you also elaborate on how you coordinate with
17 DCLA on storefront vacancies?

18 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: So we have regular
19 conversations with DCLA and a variety of city
20 agencies on challenges that come up in the city in
21 terms of economic recovery. We're in a really bright
22 spot at this point now. We are at 183,000 small
23 businesses, a record-breaking number.

24 We've never been at this number before. There
25 are persistent challenges in vacancies. And

1 Councilmember, we had a hearing right a couple months
2 back on this particular topic.

3
4 But we're seeing overall the city's recovery has
5 been incredibly strong. Three out of the five
6 boroughs have a vacancy rate less than 10%. Two of
7 them are around 10, 11%.

8 And really concentrated around central business
9 districts and areas where work-from-home has taken a
10 hit on the economy. But we're seeing a tremendous
11 outer borough resurgence. And that's backed by some
12 of the XYZ and vacancy data that we have at SBS.

13 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Yep. And what are ways that
14 SBS has worked together with DCLA on the issue of
15 storefront vacancies, which is obviously a very
16 concerning issue?

17 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: So we've discussed how DCLA
18 funds the Arts on the Avenue program, which activates
19 vacant storefronts. I can defer to them to speak
20 more in detail on that. So, we've talked about their
21 strategies.

22 We've talked about our strategies, which include
23 the wide range of grant programming that you've heard
24 of today, over \$35 million deployed, most of which is
25 new funding that never existed at the agency, but for

1
2 the Blueprint For Economic Recovery that our First
3 Deputy Mayor led at the beginning of this
4 administration.

5 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Okay. So, I have a lot of
6 questions about the different grants, including
7 Avenue NYC, Neighborhood 360, the Public ROM Grant,
8 the Street Improvement Program, but I'll pause for
9 now. I'll turn it over to my Co-Chair, Councilmember
10 Carlina Rivera, for questions.

11 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you. Those are good
12 questions. I'm excited. I wanted to follow up on a
13 couple of programs that you mentioned that I'm
14 actually a bit unfamiliar with. And I think that's
15 why, you know, having this hearing is going to be so
16 informative, because Small Business Services, you
17 clearly have laid out the number of grants that you
18 are allocating and dispersing, and it's great news,
19 and I want to bring as many of those grants to the
20 cultural community as possible, and so that's why
21 we're here.

22 So, let's start with Arts on the Avenue. Can you
23 tell us a little bit about that?

24 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: That's a DCLA-funded
25 program. We'll defer to them.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: All right, all right. Well,
3 let me just start with-- Chair Feliz is going to ask
4 about the Storefront Improvement Program, but why I
5 bring it up is because, you know, my district is very
6 interesting in that we have these great small
7 businesses, and many of them are actually rooted in
8 hospitality. And so sometimes we don't have
9 businesses-- multiple businesses on a block opening
10 until later on, and there was at one point where we
11 tried something called the 100 Gates Project, which
12 was to paint the rolled gates because these
13 businesses don't open until 4 or 5 p.m., and so we
14 want to ensure that it doesn't look like a shuttered
15 business. We know what that attracts, sanitation
16 issues, et cetera, and so we gave an opportunity to
17 local artists to actually paint these storefronts.

18 And so I thought that that was something that I
19 felt was high impact and didn't require a ton of
20 funding, always ensuring that our artists and our
21 cultural institutions and organizations are getting
22 paid a living wage and what they're worth.

23 So, we could get more information on that.

24 Another program that you did mention that I'd
25 love some more information was the Culture at Risk

1
2 Task Force. Can you talk to us a little bit about
3 that?

4 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: That's also led by Senior
5 Advisor Anne Del Castillo at Department of Cultural
6 Affairs. It's a task force. Our understanding is to
7 focus on bringing resources to nonprofits that are
8 struggling from the city, state, federal levels and
9 consolidating that information, and there's an
10 interagency task force that we serve on, and we
11 provide any information from the SBS side on services
12 and resources we have that could be helpful to those
13 organizations.

14 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Okay. Well, you mentioned
15 some of funding sources that you allocate directly.
16 For example, some of them go to BIDs. Do any SBS
17 funding sources cover a BID hiring artists or
18 cultural organizations to bring performances or
19 artworks to their districts?

20 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: Yes. So, we have the
21 small BID Grant Program that was done, or launched by
22 the Adams Administration to support our smallest
23 BIDs. We wanted to make sure that some of our
24 smallest BIDs, most of them being in the outer
25 boroughs, would be able to do public space activation

1 and really amplify the work that they were doing
2 along commercial corridors.
3

4 So, as part of that funding, they can use that
5 funding to bring public space activation. They can
6 bring local artists to their corridors to do art
7 installations. One of the grants that you did
8 mention that is sort of a DCLA intersection is our
9 Building Creative Capacity, which came from DCLA, and
10 with that, kind of similar to the 100 Gates that you
11 mentioned, is using light intervention to sort of
12 transform these commercial corridors by putting art
13 installations in vacant storefronts so that they're
14 not looking fallow and that they, you know, lobbying
15 up a commercial corridor.

16 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: You know, I just ask because
17 I have two interesting, like, examples, right? I
18 have maybe a more typical BID, which is the Union
19 Square Partnership, and they have this really amazing
20 idea to expand sort of the footprint of the park to
21 incorporate more of the streetscape, which I think
22 will-- it's already a very sort of crowded public
23 space in terms of vendors and fairs, and it's just
24 well known, it's iconic. And I feel that could
25 always use even more partnerships. They bring in

1 artists to actually paint the street itself, to make
2 it brighter, and to identify pedestrian spaces.

3
4 And then I have, not necessarily a BID, right?,
5 but I have the Fourth Arts Block, which is a place
6 that supports-- directly supports the dozens of
7 cultural organizations that live, work, and breathe
8 on the block. But there are also small businesses
9 there that directly benefit from those cultural
10 organizations, and they maintain that block in a way
11 that I feel it's unlike any in the city.

12 So, I like the BID partnership here in terms of
13 ensuring that they have the funding to hire artists
14 and cultural organizations. I also want to see, and
15 get as much information I can about, in terms of the
16 definition of, you know, how we improve districts and
17 how we maintain our blocks, and I think that
18 naturally occurring cultural districts, and you'll
19 hear from them later, they're certainly deserving of
20 as many sort of outlets and avenues of funding.

21 Are there any specialized forms of support or
22 specific opportunities available to small business
23 owners who live in the communities they serve?

24 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: So most of our grant
25 funding, Chair Rivera, is focused on community-based

1
2 development organizations and the work they do to re-
3 energize, revitalize commercial corridors, which
4 includes artists, culture, restaurants, food, and
5 beverage, so that's the work of our division.

6 We also, separate from this Neighborhood
7 Development Division, regularly, every day, we also
8 serve directly business owners across the corridors,
9 over 24,000, and we do that in all five boroughs.
10 We've got business solution centers in all five
11 boroughs that people can walk into.

12 But we also created the first-ever agency
13 outreach team. It's a central team, which merged two
14 different units that did external affairs, and now
15 that team goes out to different communities, and not
16 only walks door-to-door to merchants to educate them
17 on the services that are available, but we also
18 deploy our mobile outreach unit, an RV truck, that
19 goes out to-- has gone out to over 40 community
20 districts just in the last fiscal year.

21 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: When we look at the
22 Commercial District Needs Assessments, the CDNAs,
23 organizations have clearly identified an interest in
24 infusing arts and culture in public spaces and
25

1 commercial corridors to enrich the pedestrian
2 experience and support local business.

3
4 How has SBS worked with organizations to put
5 these interests into action? And I also just want to
6 bring up: DOT was mentioned by Chair Feliz, but we
7 also have sort of this other intersection of Open
8 Streets, which we've really relied on cultural
9 organizations to activate these spaces, and some of
10 them are along streets that have small businesses.

11 So, if you could just talk a little bit about the
12 CDNAs and how SBS has worked with organizations to
13 put the infusion of arts and culture in public
14 spaces. And does SBS monitor or collect best
15 practices for arts and culture programming by local
16 business districts, for example, for business
17 districts who are conducting a CDNA?

18 So, there's that, and then I don't know if you
19 have any information on sort of how you're working
20 with organizations on open streets, because we've
21 seen that's a direct benefit to small businesses.
22 We'd love more information on that.

23 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: So yes, so as noted
24 in the testimony, we have currently 39 CDNAs. We're
25 happy to announce that we'll have eight more that

1
2 will be published soon, and we have six that's
3 already in the works.

4 So, there's definitely a lot of rich information
5 that we get from the data that's collected from these
6 local organizations about some of the assets in their
7 commercial districts, but also some of the
8 challenges. So, once we get that information, that
9 information is then put into a report that my team
10 works with these organizations to kind of come up
11 with a deliverable-- a scope of work that can sort
12 of address some of the concerns that were raised in
13 the CDNAs.

14 We know from the CDNAs and the information that
15 we collected that the activation of public space does
16 directly benefit the businesses that are within those
17 districts by bringing more people to the corridor, by
18 bringing that foot traffic. So, we get a lot of data
19 from the CDNA that helps support us in terms of
20 identifying what works, what are some of the things
21 that we need to tweak, how we can better engage our
22 SBS with our interagency partners to support the
23 local organizations that we are supporting.

24 And then there was another question, sorry.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: It was about just Open
3 Streets and whether you work with DOT or DCLA to see
4 how you can improve the program and better support
5 the organizations that activate the space.

6 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: So, we do regularly
7 meet with DOT and their Public Space Division to make
8 sure that our priorities and some of our initiatives
9 are aligned. At one point we were funding
10 organizations that were designated as Open Streets,
11 but we don't have that funding anymore, but we still
12 provide support, capacity building support to any of
13 the organizations that DOT are working with.

14 We sometimes during these open streets bring out
15 our best team that can go out and provide any support
16 to those businesses along those corridors or even
17 adjacent corridors who may not be participating in
18 Open Street. So, we do have regular meetings to see
19 where our priorities are aligned.

20 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And you-- Speaking of
21 feedback, you partnered with an organization Designed
22 Trust For Public Space to publish a report titled
23 Neighborhood Commons Plazas Sidewalks and Beyond,
24 focused on how the city can better support commerce
25 and entrepreneurship in the public realm. And the

1
2 report reflects conversations with community leaders
3 across the city, and its key findings revolved
4 around, one, the need for fostering better agency
5 coordination; second, increasing resources in
6 underserved communities; and third, addressing
7 commerce holistically in public space. Can you tell
8 us more about the recommendations from that report
9 and how it is working to address them moving forward,
10 specifically on agency coordination and equitable
11 distribution of resources?

12 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: Thank you chair Rivera. I
13 think that just shows this report was issued three
14 years ago. It was funded as part of a pandemic
15 strategic impact grant a review of the state of play
16 at that time and it assists-- and it even provided
17 actual workflows and journey mapping for non-profits,
18 CBDs and BIDs, and navigating permitting processes
19 around the city. And it points, out as you mentioned
20 the cumbersome, sometimes processes that exist, and
21 really in response to that report, you know, you've
22 seen the focus of this administration on creating a
23 Chief Public Realms Officer. You've seen them issue
24 out a report, The Realm Of Possibility, laying out a
25 strategy on fixing wherever possible, reforming

1
2 wherever possible, the permitting system across the
3 city and establishing a central office which is one
4 of the recommendations in that report, a central
5 entity to oversee the public realm which now exists
6 through the Chief Public Realms Officer, a central
7 coordinating office that works across the different
8 Deputy Mayor verticals and the different city
9 agencies, and we're really proud to have that
10 leadership in city hall and to work with chief public
11 realms officer Ya-Ting Liu.

12 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I'm a fan I think she's very
13 smart and visionary. Can you just describe the
14 fiscal year 25 Public Realm Grant?

15 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: Yes.

16 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Where did the idea originate
17 from and what organizations were eligible to apply,
18 and how many actually applied and were awarded?

19 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: So, the Public Realm
20 Grant for FY25 really came from the previous fiscal
21 year when we did a commercial district lighting
22 grant. And this came back from feedback that we got
23 from partners about how we can improve the experience
24 on commercial corridors by improving the lighting,
25

1 but also speaking to a neighborhood's cultural
2 identity.

3
4 So, this wasn't just putting up any type of
5 lighting. One, we wanted to improve the lighting but
6 also have a way of them expressing their community
7 identity. So, after the success of that grant we
8 wanted to open it up to other components of the
9 public realm, like neighborhood navigation, which is
10 wayfinding: How can we direct people to the
11 businesses within those commercial corridors the type
12 of businesses that are there? Art, canvas, and
13 murals, the other ways of the these organizations to
14 amplify those cultural identities of those
15 neighborhoods.

16 So, we expanded the options under the public
17 realm. And this, once again, came from feedback.
18 We've done 39 CDNAs, and as stated in the testimony
19 they included some of those components, but we wanted
20 to specifically create a grant where then those
21 organizations can focus on those public realm
22 interventions that help improve the commercial
23 corridor experience.

24 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: And I'm just glad that you
25 mentioned cultural identity. What type of language

1 support are available for various cultural groups to
2 learn about and access SBS and DCLA funding and
3 support?
4

5 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: So we, Councilmember, we
6 work with a variety of CBDOs. Many of them serve
7 immigrant communities. As you probably heard in our
8 testimony the success stories we shared aren't just
9 success stories we picked out that were immigrant-
10 focused but these are really the-- reflective of the
11 kind of work that happens every single day in our
12 division.

13 So, our grants are accessible to different
14 communities we do workshops before our grant deadline
15 expires to make sure that if folks have any questions
16 about the grant application, eligibility, the
17 criteria that they're able to get that assistance,
18 and we promote these across all Community Boards and
19 we share every single grant application for our five
20 major grants with local offices, city, state,
21 federal, making sure that they can also amplify, and
22 we have our own community partners list of over 500
23 organizations that we share to and we continue to
24 build that list in partnership with others.
25

1
2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: And I just want to
3 note that we are, for this fiscal year, are funding
4 for Fourth Arts Block for the public realm grant and
5 they will be doing work along Hester, Grand, and
6 Broome.

7 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Fabulous. And one thing I
8 wanted to add. I know this was a DCLA thing with the
9 Culture At Risk, because I know we've worked with Ann
10 on the task force, who is great. We've worked on a
11 number of projects including-- with an organization
12 called The Wild Project which is in Alphabet City.
13 Anyway, it's also fabulous you should go there.

14 We just-- I was really looking for an example of
15 the way the culture at risk task force works to
16 support these institutions and maybe you don't have
17 that information directly, but I think there's
18 certainly, again, a way that that you and SBS and
19 DCLA can work together, because I think that work in
20 that task force is really important.

21 So, I just wanted to add to that.

22 I'll turn it back to chair Feliz because I know
23 you had a couple more questions, and I want to thank
24 you both.

25 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: Thank you.

1
2 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: Thank you chair.

3 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Thank you. Thank you so much
4 chair Rivera. So I would like to acknowledge
5 Councilmember Louis, who has joined us, and also
6 Councilmembers Williams and Zhuang who were with us.

7 Thank you co-chair Rivera for those questions.

8 I wanted to follow up on one of the questions
9 regarding the public realm grant.

10 Can you elaborate on how SBS has worked with the
11 chief of the-- Chief Public Realm Officer?

12 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: Yeah so--

13 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Can you provide some examples
14 on that?

15 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: So, before the launch of
16 the grant in discussion about strategy around the
17 city on how to energize public realm, public spaces,
18 we have regular conversations with the chief public
19 realms officer on those topics, and to make sure that
20 everybody is, you know, one city, one voice making
21 sure everybody knows of all the great work that's
22 happening and it lives under a strategy that is
23 directed by City Hall.

24 And, just-- I think Chair Rivera asked a question
25 that I don't think we fully answered but on the

1
2 number of applications we might have answered. I
3 didn't hear the answer, but I want to make sure folks
4 heard it on the record. We had 49 applications for
5 the Public Realm Grant. Because of the funding that
6 we had, we were able to award 10.

7 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Very good. Okay cool. All
8 right so I want to ask some questions about some
9 additional initiatives and programs including Avenue
10 NYC and Neighborhood 360 which is a program that
11 especially helps low-income communities organize with
12 projects related to revitalizing different
13 communities.

14 So, I guess for these questions we could focus on
15 Avenue NYC and Neighborhood 360, and we could cover
16 other programs later.

17 How long-- and again Avenue NYC and Neighborhood
18 360, how long have these programs been in place for?
19 How much funding has it received over the past years?

20 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: So, Avenue NYC is the
21 longest grant program that SBS had. Between the
22 grant programs that you just mentioned, it was the
23 longest. It started out as being a \$20,000 grant.
24 It was like a small-impact grant, but over time we
25 realized that to have a greater impact and to really

1
2 help build the capacity of the organizations that we
3 were working with, that we needed to increase the
4 funding to up to \$100,000 per fiscal year. So it
5 went from a \$20,000 small impact grant to a larger
6 grant.

7 Because it's federally funded under CDBG most of
8 the projects, well all of the projects have to be in
9 LMI neighborhoods. So, this is where Neighborhood
10 360 has come in, and during the DeBlasio
11 administration when we were doing a lot of rezonings,
12 SBS saw the need to really support the small
13 businesses in the commercial corridors that were
14 being-- that were undergoing rezonings and to make
15 sure that we can support those small businesses in
16 those commercial corridors.

17 So, the Neighborhood 360 grant was created to
18 make sure that we can reach those neighborhoods that
19 may not be LMI but are still undergoing neighborhood
20 changes and could still use some of the interventions
21 that we were deploying in Avenue NYC.

22 So, those are the two grant programs that we work
23 with to, one, do an assessment. So, we're helping to
24 build the capacity of these groups so that they
25 understand how to recognize some of the challenges

1
2 that they're experiencing along their commercial
3 corridors, and then to further come up with a plan of
4 action to address some of those with interventions
5 that can support their businesses.

6 All of our grantees are exposed to the myriad of
7 resources that we have at SBS. My division is just
8 one division, right?, and we focus on helping to
9 build those thriving neighborhoods, but part of that
10 is making sure that we're thinking about the
11 workforce, right?, thinking about the direct
12 resources that small businesses can receive
13 throughout the other divisions at SBS.

14 So, we connect those organizations to those other
15 divisions so we can have a direct impact on those
16 small businesses as well as the collective which is a
17 commercial corridor.

18 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Okay and I guess connecting
19 that program to product spaces. How have these
20 programs helped improve or revitalize product spaces?
21 Are there any successes that stand out? Any
22 examples?

23 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: Yeah, I mean there's
24 39 examples in our CDNA.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Maybe we can talk about top
3 three examples.

4 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: Top three?

5 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: The top three or top five.

6 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: Chair Feliz, we can't
7 choose between the neighborhoods of New York City.
8 You'll get us in trouble.

9 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: So I guess randomly, three to
10 five.

11 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: But what I would say
12 is that what we strive to do through these grant
13 programs is helping these organizations to look at
14 these spaces through a different lens, right? Once
15 again helping to connect them to the other agencies
16 that they have intersection with whether it's DOT.
17 So, that is shown during the programing. So, like
18 some of the examples when we talked about Flushing,
19 and them creating a program to help-- like it's
20 almost like a grant program-- not a grant program,
21 sorry. A program where businesses were recognized
22 where, if you took a copy of your receipt it showed
23 how many people were going to these various
24 businesses. In one of our grants in Flatbush, they
25 created a passport book that would outline all of the

1
2 businesses that are in that district so that if you
3 wanted to know where you can get the best roti, you
4 know where to go.

5 So, these are things that help these businesses
6 directly.

7 So, those are what we feel are success stories
8 when these organizations are coming up with
9 programming that directly impacts the small
10 businesses that are within those commercial
11 corridors.

12 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Right. Okay. Cool. Sounds
13 good. All right. So, you know, these grants and
14 initiatives are obviously important but of course
15 it's also important that people have meaningful
16 access to the grants and programs and obviously as we
17 know red tape can sometimes get in the way. So, I
18 just want to ask some questions on that issue the
19 issue of red tape.

20 SBS's mandate includes helping small businesses
21 navigate bureaucratic requirements and streamline
22 permitting and communications with various agencies.
23 What has SBS learned from local partners about the
24 aspects of public space activation and cultural

1
2 programming that are most bureaucratically
3 burdensome?

4 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: I think it was
5 alluded to earlier about just a permanent process.
6 Different agencies have purview over different
7 spaces. Sometimes this overlaps. So, working with
8 the Chief Public Realm Officer and as well as our
9 interagency partners we're helping organizations that
10 we work with who want to activate these spaces
11 navigate that process, and then to kind of brainstorm
12 of how we can sort of streamline that process so that
13 is not burdensome in terms of who do they need to go
14 to for certain permits.

15 You know you may have one agency that is to
16 activate the space but if you want to actually manage
17 that space, that is another agency.

18 So, we're working through some of those issues to
19 make sure that it's easy and removing any of the sort
20 of bureaucratic barriers that may prevent, especially
21 our smaller limited capacity organizations from
22 participating.

23 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Okay can you elaborate on
24 that? What are different ways that you help
25

1
2 different organizations navigate the bureaucracy that
3 sometimes exists?

4 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: I'm sorry say that
5 again.

6 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Yeah what are different ways
7 that you assist these organizations navigate
8 bureaucracy?

9 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: So, we do that one
10 because we have regular engagement with these
11 organizations, whether they're our community-based
12 partners or our BIDs. We have regular calls with our
13 BIDs, regular interactions with these organizations.
14 So, if they're elevating some of these concerns,
15 these are then concerns that we have when we meet
16 regularly with the Public Realm Officer and DOT to
17 say hey these are some of the concerns that we're
18 hearing from our partners. Are there ways that we
19 can streamline this? And if they require additional
20 conversations or legislative changes those are
21 conversations that we have.

22 So, it's really about being SBS is being that
23 intermediary to make sure that we can elevate some of
24 the concerns that we're hearing from our partners.
25 One of the things that we're looking into is a BID

1 insurance supplement to relief, right? We know that
2 for our limited capacity organizations, if they
3 wanted to activate space that there's a certain
4 liability that they would have to take on to manage
5 those spaces. So, we're thinking of how can we
6 remove all of those barriers so that those
7 organizations that know the type of program, that
8 programming that gets the community out, the type of
9 program that benefits the small businesses, that they
10 are not burdened by, you know, whether it's insurance
11 or permanent, that they would not be able to activate
12 these spaces that we know will have a positive-- net
13 positive spillover effect on the entire community.

14
15 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Okay and what are different
16 issues and barriers that people usually come and seek
17 help for? So, you mentioned permitting any other top
18 issues that stand out?

19 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: I think those are the
20 biggest issues that we've seen. I think the other
21 issues-- my team is pretty talented and can help them
22 through like what type of programming they should
23 have there. Who are some-- what's-- the timing, what
24 are the agencies that we need to direct them to.

25

1
2 So, it's really just, really navigating the
3 permanent process. Resources we help them with where
4 we can. The reason why we have these sort of inter-
5 agency meetings is if DOT is funding them for certain
6 things, then maybe we can supplement that funding so
7 that they can really have an impactful event.

8 So, we try to be aligned. But in terms of
9 resources, at SBS we try to do our best to support
10 them with it. But it's really about you know
11 permitting, purview, which agency that we need to
12 direct them to, and that's where we sort of act as
13 this sort of a light post to send them in the right
14 direction.

15 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Yeah. And I guess on that
16 same topic what are different parts of the permitting
17 process that people usually seek help for? Is it
18 filling out an application? Is it getting a
19 response? Knowing who to contact to make sure that
20 they properly submit an application?

21 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: We can give more
22 context on that, yeah. Like what are some of the
23 pain points that they're experiencing?

24 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: But Chair Feliz, just for
25 the awareness of this committee, our Deputy

1
2 Commissioner is alluding to-- the team provides
3 technical assistance almost every week whenever
4 there's an issue that a partner organization is
5 facing that receives one of our grants, they're
6 providing technical assistance through that work and
7 so this is...

8 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: And I wouldn't label
9 as an issue. Like, we work with a lot of limited
10 capacity groups, right? Sometimes it's their first
11 time activating the space, right? They want to do
12 it. They're excited. They want to be like, you
13 know, some of their other neighborhoods that are
14 doing this sort of program. So, it's just really
15 about educating them about, "Hey this is the agency
16 that has purview over this space." "This is the type
17 of permit that you might need." So we kind of walk
18 them through that process.

19 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: And this-- And very soon
20 we're going to be doing a workshop for all of the
21 BIDs and the CBDOs, and open call to really delve
22 into the issues of permitting. That's separate from
23 the one-on-one, the small group technical assistance
24 we provide but even a larger call that we're...

1
2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: And it is worth
3 noting that one of the things that my division did is
4 that we had, what we will call a Resource Fair, where
5 we invited all of those agencies to SBS, and had all
6 of our grantees come, like a tabling event so that
7 they can, one, just even know who the point of
8 contact is for DOT in the permitting process or parks
9 or at someone at DCP.

10 So, we had a resource fair with all those
11 agencies and introduced them to our grantees.

12 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Okay very good. Okay so I
13 guess now I want to ask a few questions about
14 collaborating with the bigger organizations, but also
15 with the doing outreach to the smaller organizations.

16 SBS often partners with form organizations
17 including local BIDs merchant associations, but just
18 curious: What kind of outreach efforts does SBS
19 undertake to reach smaller, and I guess more informal
20 networks and organizations?

21 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: Thank you. Thank you Chair
22 Feliz. Over the past two and a half years in this
23 administration, there's been a tremendous focus on
24 reaching immigrant communities all over the city and
25 we've done that through extensive outreach,

1
2 organizing community round tables, quarter walks
3 across the five boroughs, and particularly in
4 launching the Merchant Organizing Grant that you've
5 heard about and have heard us speak about. We've
6 gotten funding for the past three years under this
7 administration. This funding never existed before,
8 and over the past three years this funding was used
9 to unleash the creation of merchant associations all
10 over the city, and that helps in making and building
11 organizational capacity along commercial corridors,
12 and can be a first step to maybe future BIDs even
13 down the line.

14 So, that's the type of commitment that the
15 administration and our agency has shown on this
16 particular issue, and so we do outreach on our all of
17 our services, our business services, our workforce
18 services. But then we're also investing heavily in
19 merchant organizing, so that local merchants
20 themselves can chart a future for their corridors
21 together.

22 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: And oftentimes we,
23 you know, we have our usual suspects, right? Those
24 who are aware of when we launch our grants how to you
25 know submit a proper application. But what we do is

1
2 we encourage those larger, well-resourced, well-
3 knowledgeable organizations to work with smaller
4 limited capacity organizations in those neighborhoods
5 too. So we foster a lot of collaboration when we're
6 granting and when we're looking in neighborhoods that
7 we're trying to provide support and investment in.

8 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Okay. All right. I would
9 like to acknowledge Councilmember Botcher, who has
10 joined us.

11 So, you mentioned the merchant organizing. So,
12 what are other programs that are offered for the
13 smaller organizations to make sure that they're they
14 have resources to thrive but also to expand and reach
15 their community a bit more effectively?

16 So, you mentioned merchant organizing. Anything-
17 - Any other programs that stand out?

18 Our Avenue NYC and N-360 is like a great starting
19 point for small organizations because part of-- as I
20 stated before, is helping to build the capacity.

21 And given the multi-year aspect of the grant is
22 that that first year, one, we're trying to help them
23 look at their commercial corridor through a different
24 lens, right?, to kind of really assess some of the
25 challenges.

1
2 And then in the later years, through investment,
3 activation, programming, we're helping to build their
4 capacity so they think about the ways that they can
5 address some of the challenges that were identified
6 in the CDA through this program and through this
7 outreach.

8 And then once again, connected them to resources,
9 whether at SBS or other agencies, that they can use
10 to kind of support the small businesses and the
11 commercial corridor.

12 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: And for commercial corridors
13 that want to activate a public space, what would
14 collaboration look like between SBS, but also the
15 many other agencies that, I guess, have jurisdiction
16 over a public space, including DOT?

17 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: So once we make our
18 awards and we know who we're funding for any fiscal
19 year, we make sure that all of our partners are
20 aware. So, if there's other major project or capital
21 projects that may be happening within the district,
22 they know that we're also doing either a CDNA or
23 we're working with a local partner.

24 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: And what are the different
25 ways that SBS supports a neighborhood or business

1 district that may not have a formal organization?

2 They might not have a 501c3, which is obviously a
3 requirement, but is looking for ways to activate
4 public spaces, including plazas and other areas.
5

6 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: Our chambers are great
7 partners, too. Sometimes our chambers, they fill
8 those spaces where there's no BIDs or no CBDOs.

9 So, they're one of our partners that we do fund.
10 We funded the Queens Chamber of Commerce to do work
11 in College Point because there was no local
12 organization there that can support the work. So, we
13 do rely on our chambers sometimes when there's a gap
14 in terms of support.

15 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: And can you talk about
16 language-related outreach? How do we assist those
17 that might have language barriers? And also, how are
18 we tracking, or making sure that we're providing
19 adequate help on that matter?

20 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: So because this work is so
21 deeply rooted in community-driven proposals, it's the
22 community CBDOs that lead the work on the ground in
23 conducting the merchant surveys, the consumer
24 surveys, and the shopper surveys. And in that work,
25 if a CBDO, a local organization that has determined

1
2 that there should be some level of investment in
3 their corridor and revitalization work across their
4 neighborhood, if they determine that there's a need
5 to now engage with the local shoppers and merchants
6 in language, then they will take it upon themselves
7 to make sure that their surveys are conducted in
8 foreign languages, and then reflecting those insights
9 in the final commercial district needs assessment.

10 I'd also like to point out that our final
11 commercial district needs assessment is published in
12 all the 10 languages under Local Law 30. And
13 generally, for some of our programs, we go up to 22
14 languages, because we are a city with a lot of
15 diversity, and we want to make sure people can
16 benefit from all the services that we have at SBS.

17 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: So, SBS recently partnered
18 with the our organization, Design Trust for Public
19 Space, to publish a report titled... Oh, all right,
20 skip that.

21 All right, I'll pass it on, pass it back to Co-
22 Chair Rivera for comments and questions.

23 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I'll just add that... Chair
24 Feliz mentioned the partnering with formal
25 organizations like BIDs and merchants associations,

1 and that's really important. I have many BIDs,
2 actually, in my district that are really trying to
3 activate open space and bring in cultural
4 institutions. DCLA works with larger cultural
5 institutions and groups.
6

7 Sometimes, though, those are limited programs,
8 they're one-time projects, they're not necessarily
9 sustainable, and I think, as I mentioned before, we
10 really do need BID alternatives. And so I know
11 you're going to stay to hear testimony, you're going
12 to hear from some of the organizations about
13 challenges that they've encountered being in the
14 public realm program, both in fiscal year 24 and 25.
15 And I think that we can make improvements based on
16 some of those comments. And we certainly need more
17 specialized programming and services on offer for
18 smaller organizations or individuals who are
19 interested in participating in this kind of work.

20 I know you mentioned you're doing that, probably
21 more than ever. I'd say we have to go even beyond
22 that. I do want to acknowledge Councilmember
23 Bottcher. You had a question? Yeah, you're on.

24 COUNCILMEMBER BOTTCHER: Hi, how are you?

25 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: Hello. How are you?

1
2 COUNCILMEMBER BOTTCHEER: I wanted to get your
3 thoughts on how we can get more property owners to
4 agree to activate their empty storefronts with artist
5 space, cultural space, pop-up space. We've struggled
6 with that in our district. We have great programs
7 like Chashima, Art on the Avenue with Barbara
8 Anderson, who's done incredible things all over the
9 city where she's gotten property owners in a certain
10 neighborhood to all activate their storefronts
11 simultaneously. But it's a huge, huge lift. And I
12 even at one point had all my interns trying to get
13 Bleecker Street to all the landlords to activate
14 their empty storefronts with artist pop-ups.

15 And landlords, by and large, aren't interested
16 because they can't wrap their heads around it, they
17 don't see the benefit of it for them. So, as a
18 result, we really only have a small handful of empty
19 storefronts activated as artist space.

20 What do you think could be done to incentivize
21 landlords all over the city to activate their empty
22 storefronts with artist space so that it's more of
23 the norm rather than something that happens every
24 once in a while?

1
2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: Well, I mean, first,
3 we're hoping that City of Yes really helps to unlock
4 some of the opportunities so that we can have less
5 vacant storefronts.

6 But one of the things that we're attempting to do
7 is through a pilot, which we're calling Building
8 Creative Capacity. And this is a partnership with
9 Van Allen to think of light interventions that can be
10 done to activate these storefronts. And it could be
11 our installation, it could be a lighting project.

12 But part of that is how do you engage with the
13 landlords? And I think that's what you're talking
14 about. So, we are partnering with them to do a pilot
15 in three neighborhoods. But we also are working with
16 them to create a workshop so that they can come up
17 with whatever best practices that can help with that
18 landlord property owner engagement to help encourage
19 more of these type of activations.

20 And while we're only doing the three pilots in
21 three neighborhoods, this workshop will be open to
22 all of the organizations that we're funding so that
23 they can learn about these tips, these best practices
24 on engaging property owners around this type of
25 activation.

1
2 COUNCILMEMBER BOTTCHEER: Thank you. I would
3 certainly include Barbara Anderson from Art on the
4 Ave in that, because she has a way of getting
5 property owners to agree to do it. She's got
6 something going on there. I don't know, but they say
7 yes to her.

8 And so she has a lot of information, best
9 practices, to share.

10 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: All right, and a quick
11 question on that topic: Any obstacles that we could
12 foresee on that issue, for example, property owners
13 hesitating to allow painting murals on their
14 properties, given that it might impact the way that
15 people see the community, or may turn off potential
16 tenants. Is that an obstacle that we've thought
17 about or have heard about? Or any other obstacles on
18 that? Because obviously we want to react to it.

19 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: We haven't, but we
20 definitely are looking forward to collecting the
21 data. This is a pilot, so we want to see what are
22 some of the challenges and how we can sort of bake
23 those challenges either into our program design, or
24 even further conversations that we're having with
25 other interagencies about policies related to

1
2 storefront vacancies and the type of incentives that
3 would encourage landlords and property owners to
4 participate.

5 So, we'll definitely keep you guys abreast of how
6 the pilot progresses.

7 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Okay, and some final
8 questions. I know we want to hear from Small
9 Businesses and Cultural Institutions. So, some final
10 questions before we excuse the panel.

11 What are -- and of course this is a question that
12 would probably be best answered by the Department of
13 Transportation, given that they're the ones with full
14 jurisdiction over our public plazas and similar
15 public spaces -- But just curious, based on what you
16 have seen, what are some of our most successful,
17 vibrant public spaces, and what are initiatives that
18 we have taken on to help them get there? Well,
19 actually maybe not the most successful public spaces,
20 but what are some examples that stand out?

21 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: You don't want to choose
22 your favorite child.

23 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Exactly, yeah.

24 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: So, there's examples all
25 over the city of public space activations. I think

1
2 in our testimony we mentioned the West Side Festival
3 as one example. We mentioned the Coney Island
4 Mermaid Festival.

5 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: Think Chinatown, Night
6 Market.

7 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: Chinatown, Night Market.
8 And we mentioned in our testimony the Asian American
9 Federation, the work they've done in Murray Hill to
10 activate an underutilized public space, and also
11 utilize an open street that's over there.

12 So, we've gotten tremendous examples all over the
13 city. It really is 88 public space activations that
14 our work has funded over the past three years. And
15 as you can tell, it's \$7 million in the CTL budget
16 that funds a lot of this work as well. And so we're
17 trying our best with what we've had. We're really
18 proud of the past three years of outcomes that we've
19 produced through some of this pilot work that has
20 happened really in response to the economic recovery
21 work, and the first deputy mayor's blueprint on that
22 topic. And we're excited to see all the FY25
23 projects come to life by spring.

24 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: Yeah, and I think just
25 to kind of punctuate what was just stated: What

1
2 we've seen as successful projects are these are
3 activations that really speaks to the neighborhood
4 identity, the culture, and things that people want to
5 celebrate.

6 So, when Think Chinatown has a night market, it
7 brings out not only just residents of the community,
8 but other people who want to celebrate the Chinatown
9 culture.

10 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Very good, okay. Anyone has
11 questions? All right, sounds good. Well, we
12 definitely want to make sure we hear from the small
13 businesses and different cultural organizations and
14 institutions. So, I just want to thank you for your
15 testimony and also thank you for everything you do to
16 support our small businesses, our commercial
17 corridors. We really appreciate you joining us and
18 giving us all the information that you provided
19 today.

20 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: Thank you so much, Chair.

21 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: All right, Majority Whip.

22 COUNCILMEMBER BROOKS-POWERS: Sorry, I was
23 pulling it up. I wasn't going to let you off the
24 hook that easy.

1
2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: Aw, man. Sorry. I
3 had to pull it up. I left my book upstairs, I'm
4 sorry.

5 COUNCILMEMBER BROOKS-POWERS: So, one, just want
6 to thank the SBS team for coming out a couple months
7 ago to my district.

8 I'm looking forward to continued engagement on
9 how we reactivate some of the storefronts along the
10 merchant corridor. And so, as it pertains to the
11 cultural organizations, and I apologize if you have
12 already answered this. Just let me know if so. I
13 wanted to know how does SBS plan to address
14 bureaucratic hurdles that smaller cultural
15 organizations may face when activating public spaces
16 in their communities?

17 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: So yeah. I mean, we
18 mentioned it, but one of the ways that we do that is
19 if we know that a cultural institution has limited
20 capacity, we would pair them with another partner.
21 Usually we have multiple organizations that apply for
22 the same neighborhood.

23 So, if we see that there's an opportunity for
24 collaboration for a well-resourced organization, we
25 suggest that there's pairing with a smaller

1 organization so that they can work together. And it
2 helps to build the capacity of that smaller
3 organization, but also gives them an opportunity to
4 then be a part of the public space activation. And
5 then they're aware of the process, and once again,
6 what are the agencies that they need to be involved
7 with who have purviewed over these spaces.
8

9 So, it was like sort of learning from their other
10 partners, and creating that sort of network because
11 we realized that working together, they have a better
12 impact than just individually.

13 COUNCILMEMBER BROOKS-POWERS: And who would,
14 like, a smaller organization be able to reach out to?
15 Like is there a person in particular at SBS to know
16 who would match them up with someone?

17 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: So, it would usually
18 happen when we're launching our grants. But at any
19 time, any time of the year, they can reach out to our
20 agency to find out the type of grants that we offer,
21 when those grants will be open. And then just any
22 questions about the application process and how to
23 apply.

24 COUNCILMEMBER BROOKS-POWERS: And how does SBS
25 and DCLA measure community engagement and

1
2 satisfaction in neighborhoods where cultural
3 districts and local programming are newly introduced?

4 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: So this work, Councilmember,
5 this work is inherently led by community-based
6 organizations and we track a wide array of metrics
7 with the number of people, number of events, and
8 Deputy Commissioner can go really into very specific
9 detail. We've got two pages of the metrics that we
10 have depending on the grant that we operate, and what
11 information we collect from our grantees.

12 So, that work is done to ensure that there's
13 outcomes from that work that we can all celebrate and
14 it's leading to real revitalization on corridors
15 across the city.

16 COUNCILMEMBER BROOKS-POWERS: Okay, my last
17 question for you is: Can SBS and DCLA elaborate on
18 how they are engaging with outer borough communities,
19 particularly in Southeast Queens and other transit
20 deserts to bring cultural programming to these
21 neighborhoods? And I will start by saying that I
22 know that there's activation in our new plaza in Far
23 Rockaway, which is great. I would love to see some
24 more activation with things on the mainland side,

1
2 like in the speaker, Councilmember Williams, in my
3 district, in the greater Southeast Queens area.

4 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: So, Councilmember, we would
5 encourage you and any member that has any non-profits
6 that work in any part of your district where you feel
7 like there hasn't been enough investment in some of
8 this public space activation, to please let us know
9 what the non-profits are, connect us with those non-
10 profits. We want to make sure they're aware of every
11 single grant opportunity that the department puts
12 out, and they can compete for these competitive
13 applications. And built into our criteria is
14 consideration for neighborhoods where we have not
15 done work in the past. So, we're trying our best to
16 expand the reach of our division, and the limited
17 funding we get sometimes to as many neighborhoods, as
18 many boroughs as possible.

19 COUNCILMEMBER BROOKS-POWERS: Thank you. \

20 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: And I just want to
21 note too about the earlier question regarding small
22 organizations and knowing where work is done. This
23 is a great time to plug that at SBS, we have a great
24 neighborhood map that is on our website that shows
25

1
2 where all of our investments have been over the last
3 seven years.

4 So, if there's a-

5 COUNCILMEMBER BROOKS-POWERS: What's the website?

6 CHIEF OF STAFF KAHN: We'll share it with you
7 right after the hearing.

8 COUNCILMEMBER BROOKS-POWERS: Okay.

9 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER BROWN: And you can go in and
10 you can see where we're doing our work, what that
11 investment looks like. So, if there's small
12 organizations that want to get involved and connect
13 with those larger organizations, we'll be happy to
14 make the connection, but they can also reach out to
15 those organizations as well.

16 COUNCILMEMBER BROOKS-POWERS: Thank you. Thank
17 you, Chairs.

18 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Thank you, thank you so much.
19 Any other questions before we excuse the panel? All
20 right, well, thank you so much for your testimony and
21 also thank you for all the information that you
22 provided today. And of course, for always being
23 accessible anytime that we have questions. We really
24 appreciate it. The panel is now excused.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you. Great, thank you
3 so much, Chair Rivera. Thank you so much, Chair
4 Feliz.

5 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Thank you again. All right.
6 I now open the hearing for public testimony.

7 I remind members of the public that this is a
8 government proceeding and that decorum shall be
9 observed at all times. As such, members of the
10 public shall remain silent at all times.

11 The witness table is reserved for people who wish
12 to testify. No video recording or photography is
13 allowed from the witness table. I just want to
14 repeat that again. No video recording or photography
15 is allowed from the witness table.

16 Further, members of the public may not present
17 audio or video recordings as testimony, but may
18 submit transcripts of such recordings to the Sergeant
19 of Arms for inclusion in this hearing record. If you
20 wish to speak at today's hearing, please fill out an
21 appearance card with the Sergeant at Arms and wait to
22 be recognized. When recognized, you will have two
23 minutes to speak. Again, two minutes to speak on
24 today's oversight hearing topic, public space
25

1
2 activation and small business revitalization in
3 naturally occurring cultural districts.

4 If you have a written statement or additional
5 written testimony you wish to submit for the record,
6 please provide a copy of that testimony to the
7 Sergeant at Arms. You may also email written
8 testimony to testimony@council.nyc.gov,
9 Testimony@council.nyc.gov, within 72 hours at the
10 close of this hearing, audio and video recordings
11 will not be accepted.

12 For in-person panelists, please come to the table
13 once your name has been called. For virtual
14 panelists, once your name is called, a member of our
15 staff will unmute you and the Sergeant at Arms will
16 set the timer and give you a go ahead to begin.
17 Please wait for the Sergeant to announce that you may
18 begin before delivering your testimony.

19 Now I'll call our first panel, which will be in
20 the following order. Jane Carey from the Whitney
21 Museum, Caron Atlas from Naturally Occurring Cultural
22 Districts, New York, Ryan Gilliam from FAB NYC, and
23 Beth Allen from Downtown Brooklyn Arts Alliance.

24 Thank you so much for joining us today.

1
2 All right, so Jane Carey from the Whitney Museum.
3 You may begin whenever you're ready.

4 MS. CAREY: Great, thank you. Hi, good morning,
5 everybody, and thank you, Chair Feliz and Chair
6 Rivera, and members of the--

7 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Can we have the microphone
8 on? Yes.

9 MS. CAREY: Okay, hi, good morning. Thank you
10 for holding this hearing today and offering the
11 opportunity to speak about the Whitney's
12 collaborations with its neighboring cultural
13 institutions, nonprofit, and business community,
14 which has helped to support key institutional
15 priorities like raising engagement with our new free
16 admission initiatives, Free Friday Night, and Free
17 Second Sundays.

18 The Whitney's a museum dedicated to the art of
19 America and located in the Meatpacking District on
20 Manhattan's west side. The neighborhood has always
21 been a hub for culture, and in recent years, with the
22 opening of new organizations like The Shed and Little
23 Island, we've really cemented our neighborhood as one
24 of the city's great cultural communities.

25

1
2 The museum has joined with 20 other cultural
3 nonprofits to form the West Side Cultural Network.
4 We're a group that meets regularly to discuss how we
5 can support each other's missions and also to produce
6 the annual art celebration, West Side Fest. West
7 Side Fest launched in 2023 to welcome New Yorkers to
8 visit our institutions with free and low-cost special
9 programming, and spotlighting all our community has
10 to offer. The first year event welcomed in over
11 50,000 people to participating institutions, and the
12 2024 event served over 130,000 visitors.

13 The event was promoted by a communications plan,
14 which earned over 609 million media impressions for
15 the neighborhood. And it was made possible thanks to
16 financial and in-kind support from our business
17 community, including Bloomberg Connects, Mercado
18 Little Spain, Chelsea Market, Pier 57, Amazon, Wix
19 Playground, and the Meatpacking District Business
20 Meatpacking BID.

21 We're also so grateful to the New York City
22 Department of Cultural Affairs and our elected
23 officials that helped to support this event with
24 spotlighting opportunities on how we could better get
25

1
2 the word out to New York and joining us at a kickoff
3 event to promote it.

4 I also want to take a moment to speak about us
5 being located within the Meatpacking BID. The BID
6 manages our Open Streets Program, and we're very
7 grateful for their leadership there. Partnering with
8 them has made it less time-consuming and
9 significantly more affordable for us to activate our
10 public space to offer free special programming.

11 [BELL RINGS]

12 Okay. All right. Thank you. We most recently
13 worked with them on Sunday, October 13th, to offer
14 free public dance classes on our street with Ailey
15 School faculty as part of our Edges of Ailey
16 exhibition. The public worked with dancers on the
17 street, and the Commissioner of Cultural Affairs also
18 joined us for this, our October 3, 2nd Sunday, which
19 served over 6,000 visitors. It's one of our highest
20 attended events so far.

21 So, thank you very much for spotlighting the ways
22 that we can partner with our community and government
23 to help strengthen our offerings.

24 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Thank you, thank you so much.
25 So, we'll have the four panelists provide testimony,

1 and then we'll give everyone an opportunity to ask
2 questions to the panelists.
3

4 So, next is Karen Atlas from Naturally Occurring
5 Cultural Districts of New York.

6 MS. ATLAS: Hi, I'm Karen Atlas from Naturally
7 Occurring Cultural Districts New York, and we're
8 delighted that you're having this hearing.

9 We're a citywide alliance of cultural networks
10 and community leaders working to revitalize New York
11 City from the neighborhood up, and we were part of
12 the CreateNYC team. NOCDNY came together in the wake
13 of the 2009 economic crisis in response to the
14 vision, needs, and resilience of our communities. We
15 drew on the idea of Naturally Occurring Cultural
16 Districts as an organic and affirmative framework for
17 how arts and culture can be integrated in community
18 recovery and transformation.

19 What is needed for NOCDs to flourish? Community
20 self-determination, strong cultural hubs and
21 neighborhood networks, sustained cross-sector
22 partnerships, leadership development, peer learning,
23 affordable space, activated public spaces,
24 progressive policies that further equity, and long-
25 term flexible funding that is responsive to the

1
2 unique contexts of communities and the ways that
3 small organizations work.

4 I've shared with you a booklet with
5 recommendations from our Reimagining New York City
6 Visioning Sessions held with partners across the
7 city. I'm just going to highlight a couple of them:

8 Support the cultural hubs and networks that
9 strengthen our communities with dedicated funding for
10 NOCDs. A community cultural hub program with long-
11 term public and private support could play a critical
12 role.

13 Center community decision-making in the design,
14 development, management, and programming of public
15 spaces.

16 Proactively increase equity by resourcing groups
17 who have historically had little access to public
18 space.

19 Addressing barriers to participation. And I can
20 talk to you about permits and funding delays.

21 Recognize and support community-based forms of
22 infrastructure in addition to BIDs.

23 [BELL RINGS]

24 And can I just add one example? And the BID
25 alternative, as you put it. So, an example is a

1
2 discretionary grant we got from Councilmember Shahana
3 Hanif via SBS in support of the Kensington Cultural
4 Council made up of small cultural organizations
5 serving immigrant communities in Kensington. And we
6 serve as the programming partner for the Avenue C
7 Plaza. Another support for that work was DOT's Plaza
8 Equity Program, which we hope will continue.

9 Thank you for the opportunity to testify. And I
10 can talk more about the alternative BID to BIDs
11 issue.

12 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Thank you, thank you for your
13 testimony. Next up is Ryan Gilliam from FAB NYC.

14 MS. GILLIAM: Now, I think, okay. Hi, I'm Ryan
15 Gilliam. I'm the Co-Founder and Executive Director
16 of Fourth Arts Block, or FAB NYC. We're a team of
17 artists and organizers working to preserve,
18 strengthen, and grow the cultural vibrancy of the
19 Lower East Side. We were founded in 2001 by a dozen
20 cultural organizations who ultimately succeeded in
21 stopping our displacement from East Fourth Street.
22 Today, we serve all of Community District 3, from
23 14th Street to Canal, Bowery to the East River. We
24 have a membership of 45 cultural organizations. We
25 organize community-wide events, produce public art

1 projects, activate open streets, parks, and plazas.

2 We work with neighborhood groups on local issues,
3 document community histories, offer fellowships and
4 affordable workspace for artists.
5

6 We are a founding member of NOCD in New York, and
7 we're also a fiscal year 24 and 25 grantee of the SBS
8 programs that have been talked about today.

9 In New York City, this ginormous metropolis, the
10 cultural character of our neighborhoods, is, I think,
11 our saving grace. It fosters connection. It allows
12 us to live at a human scale. And yet, the cultural
13 character of our neighborhoods is also fragile, even
14 consistently endangered. We all know what it is to
15 lose what makes a place dear to us, what makes it
16 special, what makes it specific.

17 In the Lower East Side, sadly, we have some
18 expertise in understanding this dynamic of cultural
19 erasure.

20 All our neighborhoods have cultural assets. All
21 of them need cultural organizers. There are too few
22 organizations like FAB who are focused on the
23 cultural well-being of a neighborhood.

24 I deeply appreciate that SBS recognizes that
25 culturally vibrant neighborhoods are where people

1
2 want to be, live, work, and do business. I would
3 like to see SBS move from project-oriented funding
4 towards sustainable multi-year funding.

5 [BELL RINGS]

6 If you'll let me continue:? I would like to see
7 it grow its public realm program and fund more
8 cultural partners like FAB, rebuild its support for
9 Open Street, and expand that support to community
10 parks and plazas. And I would like to see SBS
11 support community incubators for cultural organizers
12 with training, workspace, mentorship, and funding for
13 pilot projects.

14 Thank you very much.

15 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Thank you for your testimony.
16 Next, Beth Allen from the Downtown Brooklyn Arts
17 Alliance.

18 MS. ALLEN: Hi, my name is Beth Allen. I'm the
19 Executive Director of the Downtown Brooklyn Arts
20 Alliance. I had sort of prepared different remarks
21 because I wasn't sure exactly how relevant this
22 hearing was going to be, but it's extremely relevant.

23 So, Downtown Brooklyn Arts Alliance is a network
24 of 60 arts organizations in the greater Downtown
25 Brooklyn area. Most of our organizations are small.

1
2 We were founded in the wake of the Downtown Brooklyn
3 rezonings, and it was a group of cultural
4 organizations who came together and said, "Our
5 neighborhoods are about to change. We need to make
6 sure that we can be a bridge between the old and the
7 new."

8 But especially, I think one of the things that
9 was really recognized was that the larger
10 organizations were the ones that were being called
11 upon to talk about economic development in the
12 neighborhood. And it was the smaller organizations
13 who were left out of these conversations, and they
14 said, we all need to come together and make sure that
15 those voices were equally represented, and also that
16 the opportunities that we knew would flow from growth
17 of our neighborhood would flow not only to BAM and
18 BRIC and the other major organizations in our
19 network, work, but to the small dance and theater
20 companies, the small music ensembles, the-- those
21 that serve lower income populations and special
22 needs. We have a lot of organizations that serve,
23 you know, disabled individuals, low-income kids, etc.

24 And so one of the you know, one of the key-- one
25 of my key mandates is to kind of be that

1
2 representative, to be the person who pushes the BID
3 to say, "Can you please take into account these other
4 voices I know you care most about like the ones that
5 actually, you know, serve the most people that or
6 most visibly."

7 One of the things that was really apparent in the
8 in the testimony today was the extent to which [BELL
9 RINGS] a lot of these opportunities coming from small
10 business services serve visual arts organizations and
11 individual artists. Those opportunities don't flow
12 to small organizations.

13 The difference between an having an individual
14 performer or a DJ or something on your open street is
15 very different than having a dance company perform.
16 For starters, it's much more expensive and often much
17 more complex, requires more lead time, et cetera.

18 And so one of the key issues that I'm focused on
19 is trying to advocate for those different kinds of
20 opportunities, to not just see open streets as an
21 opportunity for, you know, your average local rock
22 band, but also for organizations that are doing more
23 complex, more community relevant, more, you know,
24 interesting work, if I may say so. And more

1
2 representative of what the cultural community of
3 downtown Brooklyn actually is.

4 So, thank you.

5 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Yep, thank you. Thank you so
6 much for your testimony. Anyone has any questions
7 for the panel? Councilmember? Chair Rivera and then
8 Councilmember Paladino.

9 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you so much. I have
10 so much love and respect for all of you. You do
11 incredible work in your neighborhoods. And it's been
12 such a joy and privilege getting to know you. You
13 know, I have a broad question in terms of like, what
14 opportunities do you see for the city? That's DCLA,
15 that's SBS, specifically. Those are the agencies
16 that are here, though, I agree DOT and Open Streets
17 must be included.

18 What opportunities do you see for the city to
19 better support your work? And in your experience --
20 and Ryan, you mentioned this -- you're in the public
21 realm grant space. And this, if you could speak
22 directly to some of the challenges and difficulties
23 that tend to arise, maybe in that space, or when even
24 when you're working with different types of funding
25 sources, I'd love to hear about that.

1
2 So, is that broad enough? Or too broad.

3 MS. GILLIAM: Well, let me start now, and you can
4 narrow me down.

5 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Okay.

6 MS. GILLIAM: So, just to say, I think the public
7 realms grant that's been talked a lot about today at
8 SBS, I think it's a really awesome, you know, new
9 program. And I love seeing how it's focused and
10 thinking about arts and culture is different than
11 just professional arts, but thinking about the
12 cultural experience of a neighborhood, right?

13 But it is tricky. As they said, it's \$650,000.
14 We got a grant to do a lighting project. We're one
15 of 10 grantees, and it's \$100,000 grant.

16 This is a reimbursement-based grant, my operating
17 budget is \$450,000. So, just right there, you can
18 see that it's a bit of a stretch for a smaller
19 organization to even come into, you know, taking
20 something like that on.

21 The other thing I would say is these are very
22 complicated projects. These lighting projects
23 require all kinds of permissions from DOT, electrical
24 support. I did one of them last year, I'm involved
25 in another one this year happening in Sarah Roosevelt

1
2 Park, which is also kind of trying to address-- it's
3 bringing together culture and safety at the same time
4 in a park that has a lot of issues going on.

5 But the timeframe, which I find out from doing
6 the grant, and the time it has to be done, it's not
7 actually so hard on the on my end to put my
8 partnerships together. But it's very slow working
9 with DOT getting them to approve anything. Parks is
10 trying hard to work with us. But I would just say
11 that there's a timing issue, often with these
12 ambitious projects.

13 And there, there certainly is a, you know,
14 liability concern. I'm signing off to these
15 contracts to be the liable partner on them. And, you
16 know, that's-- that's certainly something I have to
17 think about carefully. I would also just say that
18 there are too few projects, right? It's a great
19 program, but it's hitting neighborhoods once, and
20 then they're going to move on to other neighborhoods.

21 So, this is not a sustainable program, even
22 though I think they're trying to be very innovative
23 about how they activate public space. So, those are
24 my initial thoughts there.

1
2 MS. ATLAS: Yeah, I would underscore the timing
3 issue.

4 For a small group, we're very small. And then we
5 work on behalf of even smaller groups. And so, for
6 the work-- and the reimbursement nature is really
7 difficult for-- we front all the money for the
8 Kensington Cultural Council, have to wait months then
9 to get reimbursed for it.

10 None of the small groups could-- could do that.
11 They wouldn't have the cash flow to do that. So,
12 that's-- that's a big challenge.

13 I think the other thing is, I'm really intrigued,
14 and really want to promote this idea of other
15 infrastructure-- other forms of infrastructure that
16 are network based. And so there, you know, the idea
17 of a BID is one kind of infrastructure, but so is a
18 naturally occurring cultural district. So, is a
19 community network.

20 We have so many examples of them. We just did
21 work in five communities, including on the with FAB,
22 to really drill deep on what makes these work, and
23 how they function. And that's on our website, that
24 that participatory action research we did.

1
2 And I would call for more transparency. The
3 funding we get from SBS, we had no idea it existed,
4 we found out about it, because our Councilmember
5 brought it to our attention, because it was a
6 discretionary grant.

7 And then we had a Councilmember who worked
8 closely with us, Councilmember Lander, and then
9 Hanif, to really develop a mechanism like the
10 Kensington Cultural Council. So, it was a real great
11 partnership of developing this alternative form of
12 community infrastructure. So, those are just a few
13 things.

14 And then when you're funding a network, you have
15 to look at it differently. So, many grants are about
16 funding one group. And if you're trying to have
17 equity, and you're trying to decentralize and really
18 form a network, it's a different form of funding that
19 allows you to bring multiple groups together to ask
20 for money, and you can still be accountable with that
21 model. But people need to understand better how
22 networks work, and how they actually further equity.

23 MS. ALLEN: To piggyback on that, um, I think,
24 you know, one-- I think I can say on behalf of all
25 of us-- more funding for organizations like ours,

1
2 because we don't fit neatly in any philanthropic
3 guidelines, any government guidelines, any small
4 business guidelines.

5 We are a relatively new organization, I am
6 largely funded by our member organizationsCT p, we
7 charge fees, because we don't really qualify for, we
8 qualify for very little else.

9 We developed a new pilot initiative last year
10 called Arts Month May designed to promote the work of
11 our organizations in May. As part of that, we built
12 out a platform so that we could do like neighborhood
13 guides, so that small-- we could have small business
14 listings, that we could put in their information
15 about other cultural organizations, other social
16 service organizations, to really try and bring a full
17 community together. I did it on \$3,500, not
18 including my salary.

19 And, you know, this is an initiative where we
20 would love to invest in a really robust website,
21 would love to invest in staff to actually work very
22 closely with the BIDs with, you know, to ensure that
23 it is really robust in terms of our cultural partner
24 or partners outside the cultural community. But we
25

1 simply don't have the funding. I'm a single person
2 staff.

3
4 This was, frankly, like something that I was
5 like, we just need to do it as a proof of concept.
6 But there's no logical place for me to get funded for
7 that. It's not because it's serving a general
8 audience because it's serving cultural organizationsp
9 and small businesses, and not, you know, the
10 community itself directly. It just doesn't fit into
11 guidelines. And that's true of most of what we do.
12 And I'm not seeing that change at a foundation at
13 the, you know, at a philanthropy level.

14 We are also-- you know, we're grassroots. We're
15 here to be the voice of, you know, and think about
16 things from the arts perspective. I think often
17 we're asked to fit into the, the business
18 perspective, or the, you know, a very narrow
19 conception of community, whereas the arts are trying
20 to broaden that and think about it differently.

21 And it's hard work. Doesn't pay well.

22 Ryan, did you want to add something?

23 MS. GILLIAM: I just wanted to add to recognize
24 that, actually, when we think about the cultural
25 character of the neighborhood, we aren't just

1
2 thinking about our artists and cultural
3 organizations, right? We really are thinking broadly
4 about what is the cultural health of a neighborhood
5 that includes all kinds of heritages, all kinds of
6 stories that are important to that community.

7 So, I just also-- I think that that's why this is
8 an interesting conversation to be having at small
9 businesses, right?, who is thinking about that
10 broader health of a community, and a little bit
11 different than what we talk about when we're at
12 Department of Cultural Affairs.

13 MS. CAREY: There we go. I just wanted to jump
14 in and say that I-- when you think about the things
15 that government can do to help us in their work,
16 having this hearing is so helpful. The Westside
17 Cultural Network: We're five years old, we're still
18 figuring out what we can do together, to meet my
19 other leaders in the cultural space who've been
20 through the challenges that we're grappling with as
21 we meet regularly is helping us advance our work so
22 much faster.

23 So, just being a space for convening and
24 introducing other people in the sector is so useful.

25

1
2 Again, I give a shout out to offices of our
3 elected officials that helped to support Westside
4 Fest and cultural affairs, but our partners in
5 government have unlocked things that maybe didn't
6 even occur to us could be opportunities for
7 celebrating the work we're doing. So, just
8 appreciate that.

9 With the network in Westside Fest, I think we are
10 trying to figure out how do we break through. We
11 took the idea-- We got the idea for Westside Fest
12 from our community. Our Community Boards told us,
13 "We know you're here, but we didn't realize all the
14 great things you did." So, we came up with this
15 event to shine a spotlight on it. So, we are
16 responding to the needs of our community.

17 How do we make it an annual moment that people
18 anticipate, like Museum Mile and like the event so
19 many of us around here produce? That's where that
20 additional marketing support and dollars to have been
21 really helpful.

22 And the other thing the network needs some
23 assistance with is just operational things. This
24 past year, we experimented by working with Project
25

1
2 Cart to offer free busing for seniors to get to our
3 sites during the course of the event.

4 I think we had some lessons on how we can do
5 better next year. But that'd be that's just a unique
6 challenge in our community, too. So, thank you.

7 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Actually, I wanted to ask
8 you, because one thing that was mentioned in this
9 conversation was serving a particular group. And the
10 Whitney recently-- How did you decide to go for free
11 for young adults all the time?

12 MS. CAREY: I have to credit our director Scott
13 Rothkoff and our, our trustee, Julie Maritou and
14 another trustee Susan Hess for prioritizing that. I
15 think are-- They, Julie especially, spoke very
16 movingly about how when she was a young artist, how
17 important it was for her to have access to our city's
18 cultural spaces. And we feel like it's a vital
19 importance for the institution to make ourselves as
20 accessible as possible to young folks that might be
21 facing other barriers for entry. So, we're really
22 proud about that program that will launch in
23 December. That adds on to our free Friday nights
24 every Friday from five to 10 o'clock and our free
25

1 second Sundays where we're free every second Sunday
2 of the month.
3

4 And I'll just say since those other programs
5 launched in January, we've seen a very different--
6 we've seen a difference in our audience, our audience
7 during our free admission hours as typically 10 years
8 younger than our general audience. Gosh, we're 60%
9 BIPOC during our free admission, we're 36% during
10 regular hours, and also the household income has
11 dropped. So, we're really proud of that work. And
12 thanks for the opportunity.

13 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: That was going to be my
14 follow up question is like, how has it changed your
15 type of visitor? That's very interesting.

16 I think someone else? Oh, I just-- So before we
17 just go to Councilmember Paladino, who has a
18 question, I just wanted to also say like, in this
19 conversation, you know, Ryan told me this a long
20 time, not a long time ago, but it's like stuck with
21 me, that I think that there's unfortunately an
22 expectation that artists-- forgive me, I'm
23 paraphrasing-- that artists and people that work with
24 artists are going to create, there's just an
25 expectation that you'll continue to create. And

1
2 that's not necessarily fair to you all. You're
3 deserving of funding and support. So, that's why
4 we're trying to bring you into these spaces where
5 you're so, so relevant, and influential, and
6 beneficial. So, thank you.

7 Councilmember Paladino?

8 COUNCILMEMBER PALADINO: Thank you. I actually
9 have to piggyback on you, Carlina, because I wanted
10 to commend all of you for being here. I have a
11 tremendous respect for the Lower East Side. I know a
12 lot of people who came from there, were kind of like
13 the melting pot. And when I hear what wants to be
14 preserved: be happy that you don't fit in. Because I
15 sure am proud of that. Because this is a dying
16 breed. This is old Manhattan, right here. And what
17 you bring is unique to the table. It's so important.
18 And I don't want to see this disappear.

19 So, like I said, about Councilmember Rivera, what
20 she said was about funding: I want to see that
21 you're taken care of. This is a niche, a niche that
22 we cannot afford to lose. And you are different.
23 And I love the fact that you're different. And
24 artists and musicians and everything that fits in
25

1
2 with you, goes with my background. It's where I come
3 from.

4 So, I just want to say thank you for being here.
5 I appreciate listening to each and every one of you
6 that I had no idea. Like I said: You're a niche
7 here and there. And I'm happy to now know that you
8 exist, and I will see whatever I can do to help you
9 out. Thank you very much.

10 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Yeah, I agree with everything
11 that Councilmember Paladino mentioned. You know,
12 obviously, all of you have a lot to offer. And it's
13 important that we have programs and initiatives to
14 support you. But it's also important to make sure
15 that those initiatives are truly accessible. And if
16 all of you have to wait for, you know, eight months
17 for funding of a program that's, you know, that's
18 obviously a problem.

19 So, yeah, really important that we have good
20 initiatives, but also make sure that if there is
21 funding available, that all of you are able to get
22 access to it ASAP so that you could, you know,
23 effectively and efficiently, you know, carry out the
24 good mission and goals that all of you have.

25 Any other questions before we excuse the panel?

1
2 All right, the panel is excused. Thank you so
3 much.

4 All right, next up is Cynthia Carrion from El
5 Museo del Barrio, Leslie Davol from Street Lab Inc.,
6 Michael Schnall from Brooklyn Botanical Garden, and
7 Nicole Gardner from Building for the Arts New York.

8 Cynthia Carrion, you may begin whenever you're
9 ready.

10 MS. CARRION: Can you hear me? Okay. Good
11 morning. Saludos. My name is Cynthia Carrion, and
12 I'm here representing El Museo del Barrio, an
13 institution with over 50 years of experience in
14 amplifying and celebrating Latino, Caribbean, and
15 Latin American culture in New York City.

16 We are dedicated to making cultural spaces
17 accessible and vibrant for our community, from our
18 location in El Barrio to larger New York City
19 neighborhoods.

20 El Museo has found public space activation to be
21 a powerful tool for bringing our community together
22 and for engaging and energizing local economies. Our
23 programs, including the annual Three Kings Day
24 Parade, Dia de los Muertos, and our Uptown Bounce
25 Block Parties, one of which this past summer was

1
2 dedicated to the 60th anniversary of Fania All Stars,
3 has brought life and excitement to our neighborhoods.

4 These events are not only cultural experiences,
5 but also economic drivers for small local businesses,
6 drawing thousands of residents and visitors each
7 year.

8 Through open street permits, these initiatives
9 help connect residents and small businesses each
10 year, creating collaborative atmosphere and
11 strengthening community ties. While these events are
12 impactful, they also come with unique challenges.
13 For instance, programming in our courtyard, despite
14 being city-owned space, requires costly Department of
15 Building permits. These additional expenses, which
16 can amount to several thousand dollars, limit our
17 ability to activate the space fully and to direct
18 more resources toward community programming.

19 To better support arts organizations like ours, I
20 recommend the council and relevant city agencies
21 consider, one, reducing or subsidizing DOB permit
22 costs for programming in city owned spaces,
23 especially for nonprofit cultural institutions. Two,
24 establishing a funding stream similar to the Small
25 Business Services stored for an improvement program

1
2 to help small arts organizations beautify and
3 activate outdoor spaces, such as courtyards and
4 facades.

5 [BELL RINGS]

6 This would allow us to improve the aesthetic
7 appeal of our neighborhood and provide an even more
8 welcoming environment for visitors and residents
9 alike. El Museo is committed to sustaining and
10 expanding these community centered initiatives, but
11 enhanced city support would greatly amplify our
12 impact. Thank you for your consideration.

13 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Thank you so much. Now,
14 Leslie Davol.

15 MS. DAVOL: Hello, thanks. Yeah, so I'm Leslie
16 Davol. I'm the Co-Founder and Executive Director of
17 a nonprofit called Street Lab that's been around for
18 a little over 10 years now. And we have grown. We
19 are-- We have long been working with communities all
20 across New York. We're a citywide organization to
21 help activate public space driven by community
22 desires and ideas.

23 And I work right now at the intersection of all
24 these agencies that we're talking about SBS, DOT, and
25

1
2 Department of Cultural Affairs. I've gotten some
3 grant funding over the years from all three agencies.

4 And what I see what I think is actually the
5 single most thing-- important thing that you all
6 could encourage the city to do is to support the Open
7 Streets program. Because what I see as a real need
8 is simply a venue.

9 We all know that there is so much culture in our
10 neighborhoods, in the big institutions and the
11 organizations, in the businesses themselves and what
12 they have to offer in terms of sharing culture
13 publicly in with free activities. And those groups
14 need funding. But there's also people who do it in
15 the course of their daily lives to their neighbors
16 offering culture, sharing culture with their
17 neighbors.

18 And a venue is the single most important thing
19 that I have seen is so important. Not all
20 neighborhoods, as you know, have plazas. Not all
21 neighborhoods have storefronts. We've heard about
22 the challenges of working with landlords.

23 Public space is available. I'm not saying it has
24 to be turned over permanently 24/7 for events. I'm
25 also not saying that we should have big events and

1 festivals all the time. Festivals are wonderful.
2
3 But what I have my organization has been supporting
4 is the ongoing weekly activities that are maybe
5 smaller in scale, you know, a drawing station set up
6 with beautiful, high quality art materials, you know,
7 for people to come by and draw and share their
8 talents and look at other people drawing and share
9 who they are.

10 We have all kinds of programs that we're
11 supporting groups with.

12 [BELL RINGS]

13 And I'd love to see more support for Open
14 Streets. Thanks.

15 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Thank you. Thank you so
16 much. Next is Michael Schnall from the Brooklyn
17 Botanical Garden.

18 MR. SCHNALL: Good morning. My name is Michael
19 Schnall. I'm Director of Government And Community
20 Affairs for Brooklyn Botanic Garden. Thank you for
21 the opportunity to testify.

22 The garden was founded in 1910 on 52 acres of
23 city owned land, and is one of 34 New York City
24 institutions operated in partnership with the city by
25 independent nonprofit organizations on city property.

1
2 What's unique about the garden after its fine
3 landscape and horticultural design is its founding
4 commitment, which put education, especially youth
5 education, on par with horticultural horticulture and
6 science.

7 That commitment can be can be seen today through
8 its partnership with the local high school and our
9 pioneering work with community greening. The garden
10 goes beyond the garden walls. We teach urban
11 gardeners, block associations, civics groups, and
12 others and supply them with plant donations that are
13 grown at BBG.

14 Together, BBG, the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn
15 Public Library Central Branch, the Brooklyn
16 Children's Museum, Brooklyn Academy of Music, and the
17 Prospect Park Alliance exemplify what you're calling
18 a natural occurring cultural district. We're
19 uniquely accessible from various forms of public
20 transportation, and walkable amongst all of these
21 properties. We collaborate on marketing and
22 programmatic initiatives, like our summer Brooklyn
23 Cultural Adventures program, and collaborate
24 marketing between the museum and the garden amongst
25 the group, our staff, and are often coordinating our

1
2 engagements with the community to ensure we're all on
3 the same page with messaging.

4 Public events happen at all these locations year
5 round bringing in hundreds of thousands of New
6 Yorkers to visit these jewels in the cultural crown
7 of New York. We engage the surrounding community
8 small businesses by sharing the information about our
9 events and programming with the community boards and
10 local businesses. And in turn, it helps increase our
11 audience.

12 And we're confident that these events provide
13 spillover into the surrounding community where our
14 visitors are grabbing coffee, eating lunch and
15 dinner, and perusing stores before and after events.

16 [BELL RINGS]

17 As someone who's worked in government parks and
18 cultural spaces for my entire career, I'd be curious
19 to learn more about what new council-supported
20 initiatives could be developed in coordination with
21 SBS and Cultural Affairs, both in the form of working
22 groups and council funded initiatives to bring
23 cultural groups and New York small businesses closer
24 together. Thank you.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Thank you so much for your
3 testimony. Next is Nicole Gardner from Building for
4 the Arts in New York.

5 MS. GARDENER: Hi, I'm Nicole Gardner, Director
6 of Advancement at the nonprofit Building for the
7 Arts.

8 Building for the Arts was formed in 1976 as the
9 42nd Street Development Corporation, with a vision to
10 transform the severely distressed blocks on 42nd
11 Street west of Port Authority into a vibrant and
12 inclusive performing arts hub. We became the
13 backbone of a community movement that brought
14 together civic development and Hell's Kitchen
15 community leaders, and a diverse group of local arts
16 organizations already in the neighborhood, who
17 transformed the neighborhood by developing the
18 theaters, restaurants and apartments known as Theater
19 Row, and who advocated to turn Manhattan Plaza into
20 affordable housing for artists, the first of its
21 kind.

22 Since its opening night celebration in 1978,
23 Theater Row has been Off-Broadway and independent
24 theaters home on 42nd Street.

1
2 What's more, our audiences provide an economic
3 boost to neighborhood businesses west of Port
4 Authority.

5 Today, Theater Row refers to the multi-theater
6 complex operated by Building for the Arts, which
7 hosts 300 mostly small performing arts companies each
8 year, but it also refers to the place, especially
9 42nd Street between 9th and 10th Avenues, which
10 includes our facility but also includes our neighbors
11 like Playwrights Horizons and Signature Theater, the
12 Laurie Beachman Theater, Schubert Stage 42, just to
13 name a few.

14 We are proud of our organization's placemaking
15 and community building legacy and it lives on as Off-
16 Broadway companies continue to gather on Theater Row,
17 especially now during what is really a very
18 challenging time for the performing arts.

19 Recently, I was walking by Restaurant Row and I
20 noticed their really wonderful new sidewalk bollards
21 listing all the restaurants on that stretch. And I
22 thought, we really need that for Theater Row. So, we
23 asked the council to support cultural districts like
24 ours by helping us create improved creative signage
25 and wayfinding and bollards to display the history of

1
2 the neighborhood and the current cultural
3 organizations, spaces and offerings, as well as
4 increased sanitation services for 42nd Street.

5 Thank you.

6 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Thank you. Thank you so much
7 for your testimony. Just curious, and I guess for
8 those that have sought, I guess, access to public
9 spaces: How easy or difficult is it to get access to
10 let's say like, for example, Plaza, or any other
11 public space, if this is something that you've tried
12 in the past?

13 MS. CARRION: I can start. So, if you haven't
14 been to Museo, come. After 13 years, our scaffolding
15 is down, we have this beautiful courtyard. It is so
16 beautiful. But we are very limited in actually
17 continuing to do programming in this beautiful
18 courtyard. There is, you know, due to our
19 permitting... And so whatever we can really do to
20 kind of fast track that and also thinking about our
21 limited budgets being used to go back into some of
22 these budgetary-like administrative costs, just to
23 use a space that is literally in front of our
24 exhibits. I think there's a lot of space that we can
25 do there.

1
2 Also, just to share that in Museo does walking
3 tours of the neighborhood. And we would love to find
4 ways to kind of, again, continue to activate that and
5 highlight the beautiful cultural vibrancy that is
6 East Harlem. Thank you.

7 MS. DAVOL: I just like to add, that's pretty
8 much how our Street Lab has grown over the years to
9 fill a need for support for groups that want to
10 activate public space.

11 So, everywhere we go is by request, we pop up 500
12 times every year in all neighborhoods. And we're
13 providing other support as well. So, we're providing
14 groups with furniture, so that we can make it easier.

15 We're now helping groups actually apply for
16 permits for open streets, help them create open
17 streets, navigate them through the process, in some
18 cases serving as a fiscal sponsor, even for small
19 block associations, you know, and so that they can
20 get other funding.

21 So, there's-- there's still a need, I think. The
22 process is onerous for a lot of groups. But I think
23 there are-- there's workarounds, and there's
24 organizations like street lab that have-- that have
25 grown to fill in the gaps. And that's exactly what

1 we're doing. The permit thing people have talked
2 about. But there are actually ways to do it.

3
4 I think the issue with culture and public space
5 is a lot of cultural organizations are not set up,
6 and their whole sort of business model is about being
7 within walls often. And so I've seen this with
8 libraries, trying to partner with libraries over the
9 years, is that their model is about bringing people
10 in, doing transactions, and serving people within
11 their walls. It's hard for them to devote staff,
12 just like small businesses do, for anybody to go
13 outside their establishment to do something in public
14 space.

15 And so that's where Street Lab is coming in, to
16 try to be that support, to allow groups that usually
17 do things within their walls to bring it outside into
18 a different form. During COVID, we saw a lot of
19 groups experimenting with that. After COVID, they
20 all went back indoors because that's the way they're
21 set up, you know? A lot of them that did things in
22 public space during COVID experimented, but as soon
23 as they were able to, went back indoors because that
24 is their model.

1
2 So, I do think there's a need for other-- an
3 ecosystem that will support cultural organizations
4 and groups in taking what they do within walls out
5 onto the street in a variety of ways, whether it's
6 furniture, storage, you know, permit help, funding,
7 all that.

8 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Okay, anyone has any
9 questions?

10 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I just wanted to add, I've
11 had this conversation, you know, before with cultural
12 groups, and particularly, like, maybe a cultural
13 group can almost be leased like a public space, and
14 they're sort of the holder of the permit.

15 I'm not sure how we deputize that or figure out
16 legislation around it, and there's so much liability.
17 Maybe there's an RFP that goes out for a certain
18 amount of time, so it's something we are thinking
19 about. So, I appreciate your input on that, and I
20 just want to thank all of you. I want to thank the
21 panel. Of course, I know Street Lab's been on Avenue
22 B, for sure. So, thank you all. Thank you for your
23 contributions to the city. Thank you, Chair.

24 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Yep, thank you. And also,
25 this reminds me of some parts of my district,

1 including Little Italy, Bronx, Little Italy, which is
2 a vibrant commercial corridor. We have so many
3 activities every-- not every day of the year, but we
4 have a lot of activity. Then we have areas like
5 Fordham Plaza, for example, a plaza that the city
6 spent nearly \$40 million, about a decade ago,
7 renovating it and turning it into a state-of-the-art
8 plaza, but completely underutilized. If anything,
9 almost vacant, which is obviously a problem.
10

11 So, we have so many vacant or underutilized
12 public spaces. We have also so many organizations
13 that are looking to take advantage of these spaces,
14 but then red tape and process gets in the way. So,
15 obviously, the big problem that all of us in city
16 government definitely need to give attention to.

17 Yep, so yeah, thank you so much. Thank you for
18 your testimony.

19 All right, panel number three, Ahyoung Kim from
20 the Asian American Federation, Rosa Chang from Gotham
21 Park, and Katie Hill from Perelman Performing Arts
22 Center.

23 All right, Ahyoung Kim from Asian American
24 Federation, you may start whenever you're ready.
25

1
2 MS. KIM: Thank you, Chair Feliz and Rivera and
3 members of both committees. My name is Ahyoung Kim,
4 and I serve as the Director of Economic Empowerment
5 at the Asian American Federation, where we work to
6 raise the influence and well-being of the pan-Asian
7 American community through research, policy advocacy,
8 public awareness, and nonprofit support.

9 My small business team's efforts focus on
10 empowering immigrant-owned businesses through
11 merchant organizing and technical assistance,
12 revitalizing commercial corridors, and fostering
13 strategic partnerships to support the pan-Asian small
14 business community in New York City.

15 Naturally occurring cultural corridors act as
16 lifelines for immigrant communities, providing
17 essential services and jobs as well as cultural
18 spaces.

19 But they also contribute more than just economic
20 value. They foster social cohesion and cultural
21 exchange, enriching the fabric of our city. And
22 investing in these districts not only drive foot
23 traffic and revenue, but also showcase the diversity
24 that defines New York City.

1
2 Our work in Murray Hill, Queens, as SBS also
3 mentioned, in the past three years serves as a prime
4 example of how focused public space activation and
5 corridor branding can not only benefit local
6 businesses, but also foster cultural exchange and
7 economic growth.

8 With the support of Avenue NYC program, Building
9 Creative Capacity grant, as well as DOT's Open
10 Streets programming, AAF launched initiatives such as
11 the Find Your Soul campaign to highlight Murray Hill
12 as Queens Korea Town. Under this campaign, we
13 developed wayfinding materials such as promotional
14 videos and maps of local restaurants to help New
15 Yorkers from all communities explore Korean culinary
16 culture.

17 Additionally, our food tours and other events
18 brought over 2,000 visitors to the district.

19 These efforts have led to increased foot traffic
20 and visibility, with vacancy rates declining from
21 13.3% in 2021 to 6.5% in 2024.

22 Our local business owners have also shared that
23 they see a lot more diversity in their customer base,
24 and they see New Yorkers from all over the city
25

1
2 visiting their businesses. We believe this success
3 story demonstrates the importance—

4 [BELL RINGS]

5 May I continue? Thank you.

6 We believe this success story demonstrates the
7 importance of strategic investments in immigrant
8 cultural corridors. Unfortunately, in spite of our
9 promising merchant organizing efforts in Elmhurst, as
10 well as our track record in Murray Hill, we were not
11 given the opportunity to bring our expertise to the
12 business corridor in Elmhurst. Speaking of merchant
13 organizing, I believe that merchant organizing within
14 immigrant communities requires thoughtful engagement
15 and long-term planning. One-size-fits-all approaches
16 are not effective, given the diverse cultures and
17 business practices that characterize these districts.

18 Our experience in Elmhurst taught us that
19 building relationships and ensuring language access
20 are essential for making meaningful progress. To
21 this end, we respectfully recommend the following:

22 One, sustain and expand investments in commercial
23 corridor revitalization within naturally occurring
24 cultural districts, especially continuing the support
25 for leadership organizations such as the Federation

1
2 to replicate past success in other naturally
3 occurring cultural corridors.

4 Two, urge SBS to continue working closely with
5 community-based organizations to ensure that these
6 efforts reflect the needs and realities of immigrant
7 businesses.

8 Three, allow SBS to adopt flexible timelines and
9 deliverables in their merchant organizing
10 initiatives.

11 And lastly, encourage different city agencies to
12 work together to highlight districts and promote them
13 as destinations for New Yorkers to visit as part of a
14 local tourism campaign.

15 Thank you for your time and consideration. I'd
16 be happy to answer any questions.

17 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Thank you. Thank you so much
18 for your testimony.

19 Next, we'll hear from Rosa Chang from Gotham
20 Park.

21 MS. CHANG: Hello. Thank you very much for the
22 opportunity to speak today. My name is Rosa Chang,
23 Co-founder of Gotham Park, a grassroots 501c3 created
24 in 2021 to open, operate, and maintain a new
25 community-led public space in a neighborhood that has

1
2 been historically under-invested and overlooked right
3 outside City Hall.

4 We are an environmental justice neighborhood with
5 over 47,000 residents within a half-mile radius with
6 racial health and structural inequity in a
7 historically disadvantaged community, federally
8 classified.

9 As our site is anchored by the landmark Brooklyn
10 Bridge, we are a DOT Plaza partner, and we opened one
11 acre in 2023 and are opening a further three acres,
12 we're excited to say, by the end of this year, and
13 will be nine acres when we are complete.

14 The Brooklyn Bridge includes a built interior
15 space beneath the bridge, which are the vaults, and
16 they were originally designed to be interconnected
17 shopping arcades, restaurants, wine vaults, and
18 commercial space. They have been open and accessible
19 for far longer than they have ever been closed, which
20 is what they are right now, and they are magical and
21 inspiring spaces.

22 We have a moment that may come only once this
23 generation to advocate for opening these vaults back
24 up, and I am here today to ask for your support and
25 advocacy with City Hall, DOT Bridges and Tunnels

1
2 Division, NYPD Counterterrorism, to let New Yorkers
3 back into these singularly majestic spaces with a New
4 York public library that will service our diverse
5 local community, which is 64% BIPOC and 20% of our
6 families living below the federal poverty level.

7 Shockingly, there are no public libraries south
8 of Murray Street, so in all of lower Manhattan. We
9 think there could be no better opportunity than this
10 iconic New York landmark that celebrates human
11 imagination and achievement, to reinforce for our
12 community and our children that when we work
13 together, we are capable of astounding things that
14 spark joy in our hearts and expand our minds.

15 Thank you.

16 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Thank you, thank you so much.
17 And next is Katie Hill from the Perelman Performing
18 Arts Center.

19 MS. HILL: Good morning, my name is Katie Hill.
20 I'm in the Executive Director's Office at the
21 Perelman Performing Arts Center, known as PAC-NYC,
22 New York's newest performing arts center. Thank you,
23 Chair Feliz, Chair Rivera, the committee members and
24 your staff for this opportunity to share with you our
25 mission to create community through the arts.

1
2 Chaired by former Mayor Mike Bloomberg, PAC-NYC
3 is the last public piece of the rebuilding of the
4 World Trade Center site.

5 Since opening in September 2023, we have welcomed
6 over 200,000 visitors to our building. We create
7 connections by cultivating bonds between
8 extraordinary artists and communities. Under the
9 leadership of Executive Director Hedy Kamara-Nunez
10 and Artistic Director Bill Rauch, PAC-NYC champions
11 daring works and diverse voices in a range of genres,
12 including theater, dance, music, and opera.

13 These projects focus on artistic excellence and
14 speak to the pressing questions of our time while
15 spotlighting diverse voices from all five boroughs of
16 New York City and around the world, including those
17 from BIPOC and immigrant backgrounds.

18 You do not need a ticket to enter the building to
19 experience the artistic events on our lobby stage or
20 grab a meal at our restaurant, Metropolis by Marcus
21 Samuelson. Our lobby is a living room for lower
22 Manhattan where all are invited to relax, connect,
23 and be inspired by what they see on stage.

24 The lobby stage is designed to increase access to
25 high-quality art because all programming is free.

1
2 PAC-NYC launched our Civic Alliances Program to
3 deepen relationships with area institutions,
4 including BMCC, Lenape Center, CIDNY, the Interfaith
5 Center of New York, and the New York Immigration
6 Coalition. We have worked closely with these
7 organizations to diversify the audiences and
8 performers coming into our spaces and provided the
9 resources of the center to support our partners'
10 missions.

11 We have also worked with neighborhood
12 organizations, including Trinity Church, Chinatown
13 BID, and the Downtown Alliance to strengthen the
14 cultural community downtown.

15 [BELL RINGS]

16 We are committed to deepening our alliances with
17 longtime downtown institutions. For example, the
18 students from BMCC have public monthly showcases on
19 our lobby stage.

20 We provide the students with professional
21 performance experience, a stage run by Union Crews,
22 and the same dressing rooms used by Oscar and Tony-
23 winning actors for these students. The performances
24 by the music and theater students are truly
25

1
2 exceptional. They are the future of the arts, and we
3 are very proud to be part of their present.

4 In closing, I invite all members of the council
5 and your staff to join us for our next free lobby
6 stage performance, and we look forward to continuing
7 to build relationships with other downtown cultural
8 organizations and retail businesses and contributing
9 to the revitalization of the downtown area.

10 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Thank you so much. Thank you
11 for your testimony.

12 A quick question, and this one's for Asian
13 American Federation. Thank you for sharing all the
14 information about the work that you did on reducing
15 vacancies, vacant storefronts, which is a big issue
16 that we're seeing in many different corridors.

17 Just curious, in your past work with SBS and
18 other city agencies, has the agency ever asked you to
19 share these impacts with them or talk about different
20 ways and approaches that you were able to
21 successfully reduce those vacancies?

22 MS. KIM: Thank you for your question, Chair.
23 SBS has indeed asked us multiple times to share our
24 expertise. One of our staff members, Yung-Ju Kang,
25 in the audience today was also part of the most

1
2 recent Neighborhood Leadership Coral program, where
3 she also worked with other organizations and shared
4 her expertise about our work in Avenue NYC program in
5 Murray Hill.

6 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Okay, and has SBS or any
7 other agency connected you to different organizations
8 or groups that are doing similar work?

9 MS. KIM: In running our Open Streets program on
10 Barton Avenue in the middle of Murray Hill, DOT has
11 been exceptionally helpful in connecting us with
12 other organizations, such as Street Lab, that can do
13 programming with us.

14 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Oh, very good, okay.

15 Any questions, any other questions?

16 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: I was just going to add that
17 I know, PAC, you've made some great relationships,
18 you've cultivated great relationships with the
19 Chinatown BID, and Downtown Alliance, and Trinity
20 Wall Street, so I think that's, of course, very, very
21 interesting. I'd love to join the lobby performance,
22 I think that's great.

23 I did want to also ask about Gotham Park and how
24 do you see this new space supporting small
25 businesses?

1
2 MS. HILL: I'm so happy you asked that. We
3 actually want to partner with Welcome to Chinatown
4 and build a small business incubation kiosk program,
5 where we actually have smaller kiosks really sourcing
6 from our community, actually.

7 So Alfred E. Smith Houses is actually a next-door
8 neighbor, and Ike Satora, who is a tenant association
9 president there, has told me how people in her
10 buildings are working to start businesses, but it's
11 hard to actually figure out how that all works and
12 also to be able to access the traffic that would help
13 these small businesses.

14 So we thought if you started small, and we were
15 able to create sort of a breadcrumb trail that leads
16 into our communities that have really suffered from
17 having a lack of foot traffic like Chinatown or the
18 South Street Seaport, imagine a trail of little
19 kiosks that dot your way into Chinatown, which is
20 only a five-minute walk away from the Brooklyn
21 Bridge, and it's 10 million pedestrian crossings, or
22 along Frankfurt Street all the way to the historic
23 South Street Seaport.

24 And I personally believe that we fall in love
25 with our tummies more than with our brains, and so if

1
2 you see something that looks really yummy along the
3 path and then you want to drink a little coffee and
4 then you really want a tchotchke, because apparently
5 all the tourists in New York City do, then you're
6 just automatically going to follow these kiosks right
7 into Chinatown and the South Street Seaport, and you
8 are going to be supporting these small local
9 businesses that are started right in our own
10 communities.

11 And then Welcome to Chinatown will help them
12 figure out how to actually grow into a real
13 storefront and have a bigger presence and help them
14 with paperwork and all of this. We want to really
15 draw from our community to help our community thrive
16 in many, many ways, and that includes the whole
17 neighborhood, but also individuals and families and
18 create jobs.

19 CHAIRPERSON RIVERA: Thank you. Thank you to all
20 three of you very, very much. Chair?

21 MS. HILL: Thank you.

22 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Yeah, thank you so much for
23 your testimony and for all the work that you do in
24 your communities.

1
2 Would anyone else like to testify in person
3 before we move into the remote testimony?

4 All right, thank you so much to those that have
5 testified in person. We have four panelists who will
6 testify via Zoom. I'll call them in this order.
7 Lucy Sexton, then Michelle Cruz, then Jessica Walker,
8 and then Francine Garber-Cohen.

9 So, Lucy Sexton, you may begin whenever your Zoom
10 is unmuted.

11 MS. SEXTON: Thank you so much for hearing my
12 testimony, and thank you in particular for this joint
13 hearing of the Small Business and Cultural Affairs
14 Committees. Cultural groups have long advocated for
15 this inclusion of arts and culture groups and small
16 businesses as critical to our city's economy and to
17 its quality of life.

18 A thriving streetscape brings people together,
19 makes our communities safer, it improves mental
20 health, civic engagement, and so much more.

21 Data has proven that neighborhoods with strong
22 cultural assets have improved outcomes in nearly
23 every measure of what defines a healthy, happy,
24 productive, educated, connected community.
25

1
2 To state the obvious, when people are drawn out
3 of their homes to see a show or take their kids to a
4 dance class, they also visit local businesses from
5 diners to delis to retail.

6 In the words of Andrew Riggi, head of the New
7 York City Hospitality Alliance, our city's economy is
8 an interdependent ecosystem, and there are few
9 connections as strong as those between culture and
10 hospitality. Invest in culture, and we invest in
11 vibrant neighborhoods and thriving restaurants.

12 So, how can we support this interdependent
13 ecosystem? First, by taking action to make sure that
14 the rents for both commercial and nonprofit spaces do
15 not skyrocket once they've created a great
16 neighborhood. Commercial rent stabilization is long
17 overdue, and tax incentives to allow cultural groups
18 to rent and retain their spaces would be an enormous
19 help.

20 Increased funding for nonprofit culture is
21 essential. In Riggi's words, it's an investment that
22 will help local businesses and our economies.

23 You've heard other suggestions in these
24 testimonies, and I've included more in my written
25 testimony.

1
2 I'll simply emphasize the fact that cultural
3 organizations are also small businesses, whether they
4 operate as a nonprofit or a for-profit music venue,
5 or a combination of for-profit and nonprofit dance
6 studio, like Arts House Schools in Coney Island.
7 They should have easier access to support from the
8 city's small business services and participation in
9 the MWBE programs.

10 Cultural organizations are suffering from
11 disinvestment by philanthropy and increased costs on
12 every front.

13 [BELL RINGS]

14 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time has expired.

15 MS. SEXTON: The workforce's challenges also need
16 to be addressed. I have some devastating statistics
17 in my testimony about the flight of dancers,
18 designers, actors, and more.

19 I'll end by thanking again for raising up the
20 critical issue of supporting both small business,
21 cultural groups, and artists and culture workers to
22 live in these neighborhoods and make all of this
23 possible.

24 Thank you so much.

CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Thank you. Thank you so much
for your testimony and for all the work that you do.

I don't see any questions, so we'll move on to
the next panelist. Thank you very much. Next is
Michelle Cruz from Union Settlement.

MS. CRUZ: Chair Feliz and Chair Rivera and
distinguished Councilmembers, my name is Michelle
Cruz, and I serve as the Director of Economic
Development and Government Affairs at Union
Settlement. For nearly 130 years, Union Settlement
has been at the forefront of providing opportunities
in East Harlem. We offer comprehensive programming
to help residents improve their skills and build
better lives for themselves and their families.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today
about the importance of supporting naturally
occurring cultural districts and their impact on
communities like East Harlem. Our neighborhoods are
not just places on the map. They are living,
breathing hubs of culture and creativity that have
inspired, uplifted, and sustained generations.

East Harlem, El Barrio, is an example of a
naturally occurring cultural district, a place where
culture and community are inseparable. This

1 neighborhood, with its murals, festivals, and deep-
2 rooted traditions, exemplifies the resilience and
3 pride of its residents. However, what makes East
4 Harlem unique is not just its rich history, but its
5 capacity to adopt and thrive, even in the face of
6 economic challenges and gentrification threats.

7
8 Culture is not merely entertaining. It is a
9 driving force behind our local economy. By investing
10 in and recognizing cultural districts, we are
11 creating opportunities to attract tourism, increase
12 foot traffic, and elevate the profile of our local
13 businesses.

14 The East Harlem Cultural Theater District, a
15 vision that Union Settlement has long championed,
16 exemplifies how we can leverage cultural resources to
17 drive sustainable economic growth. Cultural
18 districts like East Harlem have long played a pivotal
19 role in anchoring our local economy. Yet these areas
20 are also at risk as economic development pressures
21 and increasing costs put their future in jeopardy.

22 As we move forward, we urge the council to
23 support the following three measures:

24 One, to designate East Harlem as a cultural
25 district. Legislation has been introduced on the

1
2 state level by Senator Jose Serrano and Assemblyman
3 Eileen Gunther to develop criteria.

4 [BELL RINGS]

5 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time has expired.

6 MS. CRUZ: May I finish?

7 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Yeah. You could use another
8 10 or 15 seconds to conclude.

9 MS. SEXTON: Thank you. To develop criteria and
10 guidelines for state-designated cultural districts,
11 we encourage the council to adopt a resolution
12 supporting this legislation. By doing so, the
13 council would empower agencies like the New York City
14 Department of Cultural Affairs to allocate critical
15 resources, including grants and technical assistance
16 to local cultural organizations.

17 This designation will provide much needed funding
18 to help institutions not only survive, but thrive.

19 Two, support public space activation, we need to
20 continue and expand programs like the Public Realm
21 Grant. This public space activation catalyzes our
22 economic growth and foster community connections.

23 Third, it's strengthen the coordination between
24 cultural and economic development agencies. As
25 outlined in the CreateNYC Plan, collaboration between

1
2 the Department of Cultural Affairs, SBS, and other
3 agencies is crucial. We need coordinated efforts to
4 implement this community-led economic development
5 initiatives that prioritize cultural preservation and
6 inclusion. In closing, with the council's support,
7 we can create this cultural district that is not just
8 a collection of theaters and galleries, but a beacon
9 of resilience, pride, and economic opportunity.

10 We hope to ensure that communities like East
11 Harlem, which have sustained and inspired many for so
12 long, are given the resources and recognition they
13 deserve to continue thriving for generations to come.
14 Thank you so much.

15 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Oh, now it's on. Thank you
16 so much for your testimony. I don't see any
17 questions, so we'll move on to the next panelist.
18 Thank you so much for testifying.

19 Next is Jessica Walker from the Manhattan Chamber
20 of Commerce.

21 MS. WALKER: Hi, I'm Jessica Walker. I'm the
22 President and CEO of the Manhattan Chamber of
23 Commerce. We represent the business community in the
24 borough, businesses both large and small.

1
2 As you know, since COVID, the highest rates of
3 storefront vacancy have been concentrated in
4 Manhattan, so we're very concerned about that.

5 As a result, we actually launched what we call
6 the Storefront Resurgence Project, which is designed
7 to do three things. We're trying to drive foot
8 traffic to commercial corridors throughout the
9 borough, we're trying to reduce the prolonged
10 storefront vacancies, and we're trying to support the
11 emergence of the next generation of local brick and
12 mortar businesses that can help to attract and retain
13 residents, workers, and tourists alike throughout the
14 borough.

15 Our organization also, as part of this, has five
16 staff members who are doing nothing but going door to
17 door to provide technical assistance and help to
18 small businesses, and some of this work is actually
19 supported by funding through the city council, so
20 thank you so much.

21 We recently launched what we call this Retail
22 Storefront Accelerator to help e-commerce and home-
23 based businesses open their first brick and mortar
24 stores in Manhattan. And then, as part of the
25

1

initiative, we also conduct surveys to really try to
understand the current state of storefronts.

2

3

4

The last one we did was right after Labor Day, we
got responses from about 275 storefront businesses in
Manhattan, inclusive of restaurants, retail shops,
and others.

5

6

7

8

The vast majority of those surveyed had 10 or
fewer employees. And just want to let you know that
about half of those who were open before COVID, half
of those said that they are doing worse or making
less revenue than they were before the pandemic.

9

10

11

12

13

Half of those also noted that they have fewer
customers coming into their businesses, and when the
customers do come in, they are spending less.

14

15

16

So, I am here today just to let you know how
supportive we are of the approach that's being
discussed today.

17

18

19

We are fully supportive of the goals of today's
hearing. Art activations, as you know, have the
ability to draw in critical foot traffic, which can
absolutely be helpful for these businesses and
stability of—

20

21

22

23

24

[BELL RINGS]

25

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time has expired, thank you.

1

2

MS. WALKER: So, we are here to help. Thank you.

3

CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Thank you, thank you so much.

4

Any questions? No questions, so we'll move on to the

5

next panelist. Thank you so much for testifying.

6

Next, Francine Garber-Cohen from the Regina Opera

7

Company.

8

MS. GARBER-COHEN: I'm Francine Garber-Cohen,

9

President and Producer of Regina Opera Company.

10

For 55 years, Regina Opera has offered year-round

11

fully staged operas and ticketed and free concert in

12

Southwest Brooklyn, and we do a lot of outdoor

13

festivals. Our performances are places where

14

thousands of Brooklyn residents, many of them

15

retirees, are able to meet friends. They get out of

16

their houses, where many of them live alone.

17

The company provides affordable entertainment for

18

audiences who may not otherwise attend live opera

19

performances. Some are on fixed incomes, and some of

20

them could not afford tickets for the Metropolitan

21

Opera. But in order to provide these services,

22

Regina Opera, like other arts organizations, needs

23

increased support from the city.

24

We at Regina Opera acknowledge that small

25

business services helps local Sunset Park and Bay

1
2 Ridge businesses to survive and grow, and that the
3 arts organizations in these and other neighborhood
4 arts organizations are also small businesses.

5 Regina Opera is just one of the small businesses
6 that play a role in supporting local establishments.
7 The company participates in many cultural events
8 hosted by the Sunset Park Business Improvement
9 District, the Third Avenue Merchants Association of
10 Bay Ridge, and the Bay Ridge Arts and Cultural
11 Alliance.

12 These events bring new and existing customers to
13 these neighborhoods, increase the visibility and the
14 income of the stores and restaurants that our
15 audience members attend.

16 We are now requesting that the small business
17 services expand support for the SBS Public Realm
18 Grants and actively recruit more neighborhood-based
19 cultural organizations like Regina Opera.

20 Thank you.

21 CHAIRPERSON FELIZ: Thank you. Thank you so much
22 for your testimony. Any questions? I don't see any
23 questions.

24
25

1
2 So, yeah, thank you so much. You're not excused.
3 Thank you for all the work that you do in our city,
4 in the cultural arts realm.

5 So, we don't have anyone else signed up, but
6 actually we did have a few individuals who signed up
7 in advance, but they haven't filled out the slip, so
8 I'll just call their names just in case they're here.
9 Shayla Lewandowski, Yira Islana Garcia-Rojas,
10 Paperboy Prince, Diane Rose, Aretha Wareham.

11 All right. So I don't see anyone else signed up,
12 so I just want to thank everyone who testified today,
13 including the mayoral administration, but also the
14 public for joining us and for testifying and just
15 giving us information about the experiences that
16 you've had on the issue of reactivating public spaces
17 and especially in the context of culture.

18 Thank you so much. This hearing is hereby
19 adjourned.

20 [GAVEL]

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C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date November 10, 2024