July 23, 2020

Hon. Bill de Blasio
City Hall

Dear Mayor de Blasio,

The COVID-19 health emergency and ensuing economic crisis represents one of New York’s greatest challenges in modern history. With such a steep reduction in business activity, employment, and tax revenues, the impact of this catastrophe will be deep and long-lasting. As we begin to move into recovery, we urge the Administration to use every tool at its disposal to accelerate a return to robust economic activity. One component with a huge multiplier effect for jump-starting our economic engine is resuming the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP) process, and we applaud your decision to restart the process next month.

Construction activity following a rezoning can provide good-paying jobs, spur significant local purchasing, and deliver community benefits such as open space, modern environmental infrastructure and new housing, particularly affordable housing that is so acutely needed now when available Capital funds for affordable housing is in peril.

The 59 already filed - and paused - applications currently in the review process will together provide widespread opportunities to spur wider economic activity and affordable housing development in every borough. Other applications are in the pre-filing stage and ready to proceed.

One significant opportunity is the City’s proposed areawide rezoning in Gowanus developed by the Department of City Planning over the course of several years of community engagement and ready to be certified into public review. This neighborhood rezoning will lead to the construction of nearly 3,000 much-needed affordable housing units and the creation of 3,000 new jobs including many union jobs. It also will create an active waterfront with open space accessible to all and ensure the artists and makers in the neighborhood’s vibrant arts community can continue to afford to work in Gowanus, which has emerged as a hub of Brooklyn’s and the city’s arts community. The Gowanus rezoning is more than a chance to help stimulate New York City’s economy—it also offers what may be one of the best opportunities for the City to meet the Fair Housing goals embraced by your administration. It is a commitment to permanent affordable housing in a neighborhood where affordable options are too few.

Other City initiatives can be completed in time for approval before the end of this Administration. These include the zoning proposals developed from the Bronx Metro-North Station Area Study which will ensure that coming Metro-North service at four new stations in the Bronx is a positive and transformational force in the lives of Bronx residents. Completion of ULURP by the end of 2021 means that development can be well underway when service from these stations begins in 2024.

It is disappointing in the wake of COVID-19 to hear some argue that what will likely be a temporary contraction of population means that there is no longer a need to build new housing at all price points for New Yorkers. There is no question that we will continue to need more places to live in the future. Time and time again, New York has overcome crises – health, political, economic – and continued to grow. Building housing – especially affordable housing by leveraging Mandatory Inclusionary Housing through private development – is critical to the economic recovery now and to move toward the
housing security New Yorkers long for. It would send a terrible message for the city to concede that its attractiveness has peaked.

The City, to its great credit, has shown that it has the capacity to sustain community engagement in public review processes despite the challenges of the pandemic. The Landmarks Preservation Commission, the Board of Standards and Appeals, and Community Boards across the city have held numerous virtual public review sessions with some of the highest rates of public participation in decades. We are confident that public review will likewise be successfully conducted by the City Planning Commission and City Council, and should be used to the fullest extent.

Sincerely,