



- [Manhattan Media](#)
 - [Our Town](#)
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- [Blackboard Awards](#)
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- [Home](#)
- [About West Side Spirit](#)
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 - [City Week](#)
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- [West Side News](#)
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 - [West Side Express](#)
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 - [Events](#)
- [Politics](#)
- [Education](#)
- [Entertainment](#)
 - [Film](#)
 - [Music](#)
 - [Theater](#)
 - [Art](#)
- [Dining](#)
 - [Dining Reviews](#)
 - [Snack Attack](#)
 - [The Penniless Epicure](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Op-ed](#)
 - [Editorial](#)
 - [Open Forum](#)
 - [Letters to the Editor](#)
 - [Columns](#)
 - [Capitol Connection](#)
 - [Manhattan Memoir](#)
 - [According to Ben](#)
 - [Dewing Things Better](#)
 - [Guest Columnist](#)
 - [New York Gal](#)
 - [Sez I To Myself](#)
 - [Susan Brady's Diary](#)
- [Special Sections](#)
 - [Healthy Manhattan](#)
 - [Pets](#)

- [Seniors](#)
- [Best of Manhattan](#)
- [Blackboard Awards](#)
- [Camps](#)
- [Building Workers](#)
- [WESTYS](#)

Browse > [Home](#) / [Op-ed, Open Forum](#) / TRUE COMMUNITY REPRESENTATION

TRUE COMMUNITY REPRESENTATION

FIRST LINE OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY MUST REFLECT THE SURROUNDING NEIGHBORHOOD

By **Scott Stringer**

April 23, 2009

Community boards are the first line of local democracy for New Yorkers, giving residents a voice in the decisions that determine the future of their neighborhoods. But when I took office in 2006, I found that Manhattan's 12 boards had little new blood and often had little expertise in their original mission: community planning. Many board members had held their seats for decades without a formal reapplication process, and new candidates had been shut out.

Reforming the boards and improving their ability to evaluate professional planning initiatives became an important priority of my office. I was particularly focused on ensuring that the 50 members that make up each board reflect the actual makeup of our neighborhoods. From initiating rezoning efforts that allow for responsible development and preserve affordable housing to incorporating community plans that address green space needs and school overcrowding into new projects, the 50 board members in each district deal with some of the biggest issues facing our city.

My office created an independent screening panel comprising leaders from government and community groups such as the Municipal Art Society, the Partnership for NYC, the Hispanic Federation, Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, NAACP, Manhattan Chamber of Commerce, LGBT Community Center and others, which formalized the process of reappointment every two years for all board members.

We still have plenty of work to do to increase the diversity on community boards, but the 2009 class of applicants reflects significant progress toward our goals. Across the borough, we have increased African American, Latino, Asian American and LGBT representation. Our 2009 appointees include school administrators, small business owners, social workers and architects. Some have been New Yorkers all their lives, while others represent our growing immigrant community—the newest New Yorkers.

We have also been successful in ensuring that the boards reflect the communities they serve. When I came to office, the Lower East Side was 35 percent Asian, but only 10 percent of Community Board 3 Members were Asian Americans. Over the last three appointment cycles, we've increased Asian American representation on Board 3 by 50 percent. Overall, 20 Latinos and nearly 50 African Americans have been appointed, and LGBT membership has risen by 32 percent.

To help make sure that boards have the expertise to deal with complex planning issues, in 2007 we assigned a graduate urban planning student to each of Manhattan's boards to serve as counsel to the board members as they weigh technical land-use matters. Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the City University of New York have committed to working with us to expand this Urban Planning Fellows Program to cover all 59 New York City community boards.

Our work isn't done, but going forward, we will continue to push to ensure that community boards include voices from all of New York's neighborhoods and come to the table equipped with the tools and expertise they need to make informed decisions.

—
Scott Stringer is Manhattan borough president.

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 - [Film](#)

- [Music](#)
- [Theater](#)
- [Art](#)
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 - [Dining Reviews](#)
 - [Snack Attack](#)
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- [Op-ed](#)
 - [Editorial](#)
 - [Open Forum](#)
 - [Letters to the Editor](#)
 - [Columns](#)
- [Special Sections](#)
 - [Healthy Manhattan](#)
 - [Pets](#)
 - [Seniors](#)
 - [Best of Manhattan](#)
 - [Blackboard Awards](#)
 - [Camps](#)
 - [Building Workers](#)
 - [WESTYS](#)

• Archives

- [April 2009](#)
- [March 2009](#)
- [February 2009](#)
- [January 2009](#)
- [December 2008](#)
- [November 2008](#)
- [October 2008](#)
- [September 2008](#)
- [August 2008](#)

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