

BROOKLYN BOROUGH PRESIDENT MARTY MARKOWITZ TESTIMONY FOR CITY COUNCIL HEARING ON DFTA'S NEW SENIOR CENTER REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS, AND ON COUNCILMEMBER JAMES VACCA'S BILL TO REQUIRE 60 DAYS' NOTICE OF CENTER CLOSINGS

DECEMBER 4, 2008

GOOD AFTERNOON, COMMITTEE CHAIRS MARIA DEL CARMEN ARROYO AND JAMES VACCA, AND DISTINGUISHED MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON AGING. THANK YOU FOR HOLDING A HEARING ON THIS VERY IMPORTANT TOPIC OF SENIOR CENTERS.

I COME BEFORE YOU TODAY AS THE BROOKLYN BOROUGH PRESIDENT, BUT YOU MAY NOT KNOW THAT BEFORE I WAS PRESIDENT OF A BOROUGH, I WAS PRESIDENT OF A SENIOR CENTER. WHEN I WAS ONLY 26 YEARS OLD, I FOUNDED THE SENIOR LEAGUE OF FLATBUSH. AND I WANT TO RECOGNIZE LENORE FREIDMAN AND HER SENIORS, WHO ARE HERE TODAY! I SERVED AS PRESIDENT OF THE CENTER FROM 1974 TO 1978, AND I'VE BEEN FIGHTING FOR SENIORS EVER SINCE. I EVEN JOINED THE CENTER THREE YEARS AGO. SO I KNOW A LOT ABOUT WHAT MAKES A GOOD SENIOR CENTER.

AND WITH THE BENEFIT OF THAT EXPERIENCE, I CAN SAY TO YOU: THIS RFP MUST BE PUT ON HOLD, OR AT LEAST SCALED BACK. DON'T MISTAKE ME: THERE ARE A LOT OF GOOD IDEAS HERE. FOR INSTANCE, I'M A BIG FAN OF WELLNESS ACTIVITIES, BOTH PHYSICAL AND MENTAL. STAYING ACTIVE AND ENGAGED IS ESSENTIAL FOR OUR SENIORS TO STAVE OFF THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF AGING.

BUT THIS RFP DOES NOT ADD ANY NEW FUNDING TO ACCOMPLISH ITS GOALS. INSTEAD, IT TAKES DISCRETIONARY MONEY FROM THE BOROUGH PRESIDENTS—AND ALSO FROM YOU, THE CITY COUNCIL—AND CALLS THAT AN INCREASE. AND WHY? SO THAT THEY CAN MAKE ALL THE DECISIONS—BECAUSE THEY THINK THEY KNOW WHAT'S BEST FOR SENIORS. IN FACT, THEY THINK THEY KNOW WHAT'S BEST FOR EVERYBODY. UNFORTUNATELY, THEY'RE NOT LISTENING TO THE PEOPLE IN THE FIELD WHO HAVE THE REAL EXPERTISE.

BOROUGH PRESIDENTS KNOW OUR BOROUGHES. YOU KNOW YOUR COUNCIL DISTRICTS. WE SHOULD HAVE THE RIGHT TO APPROPRIATE FUNDING TO THE NON-PROFITS THAT WE KNOW BEST ADDRESS AGING CONCERNS IN THE AREAS WE REPRESENT. EVERYTHING SHOULD NOT BE CENTRALLY PLANNED OUT OF THE MAYOR'S OFFICE.

NOT ONLY THAT, BUT THIS PLAN MAY ACTUALLY LEAD TO THE CLOSING OF SENIOR CENTERS. NEW YORK CURRENTLY HAS 329 CENTERS, ONE-THIRD OF THEM IN BROOKLYN. BUT GIVEN THE LEVEL OF FUNDING IN THIS PLAN, AS FEW

AS 240 CENTERS COULD BE FUNDED. THAT MEANS 89 CENTERS COULD CLOSE. THAT'S WHY I SUPPORT COUNCILMEMBER VACCA'S BILL TO REQUIRE 60 DAYS' PUBLIC NOTICE BEFORE ANY SENIOR CENTER IS CLOSED.

AND THERE ARE OTHER CONCERNS BESIDES FUNDING. AS I SAID, THE RFP SOUNDS GOOD, BUT THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS. THE PROVIDERS IN BROOKLYN ARE WORRIED ABOUT THE HEAVY EMPHASIS ON HEALTH AND WELLNESS PROGRAMS. DON'T GET ME WRONG—WELLNESS PROGRAMS ARE GREAT—BUT NOT AT THE EXPENSE OF FUNDING THE BASICS, LIKE TRANSPORTATION, CASEWORK SERVICES, AND MEALS.

THERE ARE GYMS AND YMCA'S ALL OVER THE CITY. RATHER THAN MAKING SENIOR CENTERS GO THROUGH THE EXPENSE OF RENTING SPACE, BUYING EQUIPMENT, AND TRAINING STAFF, THE CITY SHOULD NEGOTIATE DISCOUNTS WITH PRIVATE GYMS. AFTER ALL, THE HOURS OF THE DAY WHEN GYMS ARE AT THEIR SLOWEST ARE ALSO THE VERY TIMES WHEN SENIORS WOULD BE MOST LIKELY TO USE THEM.

PROVIDERS ARE WORRIED ABOUT THE TIME AND EXPENSE THAT WILL BE REQUIRED TO DOCUMENT THEIR WELLNESS PROGRAMS FOR DFTA. ONE OF THE "EVIDENCE-BASED PROGRAMS" NAMED IN THE RFP, FOR INSTANCE, COSTS THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS TO IMPLEMENT.

PROVIDERS ARE ALSO WORRIED THAT MEALS ARE GIVEN SHORT SHRIFT IN THIS PLAN. GIVEN THE CURRENT ECONOMY, MORE AND MORE SENIORS DEPEND ON THE NUTRITIOUS HOME-COOKED MEALS PREPARED AT SENIOR CENTERS. SOME PROVIDERS ARE WORRIED THAT THEIR CURRENT SPACES WON'T BE BIG ENOUGH FOR ALL THE NEW REQUIRED PROGRAMS. CENTERS IN POORER NEIGHBORHOODS ARE WORRIED ABOUT THE FUNDRAISING REQUIREMENT.

BIGGER CENTERS ARE WORRIED THAT DFTA IS ONLY PLANNING TO FUND 15 TO 25 SENIOR HUBS, EVEN THOUGH MANY MORE CENTERS THAN THAT WOULD MAKE EXCELLENT HUBS. THEY FEAR THAT THE RFP PITS GOOD PROGRAMS AGAINST GOOD PROGRAMS. IF THERE ARE 3 OR 4 POTENTIAL HUBS IN AN AREA, AND ONLY ONE IS CHOSEN, WILL THE OTHERS HAVE TO DOWNSIZE, TO SERVE ONLY 75 MEALS A DAY?

NOW, YOU CAN SAY THESE FEARS ARE OVERBLOWN. BUT WHAT IF THEY'RE NOT? WE WON'T KNOW UNTIL THE NEW CONTRACTS HAVE BEEN AWARDED—AND THEN IT WILL BE TOO LATE.

PERSONALLY, I TEND TO BELIEVE THE SENIOR PROVIDERS. NUMBER ONE, THEY HAVE HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE RUNNING SENIOR CENTERS. THEY CAN SEE WHERE THE PITFALLS MAY LIE. AND NUMBER TWO, WHEN DFTA REORGANIZED CASE MANAGEMENT, IT SOUNDED GOOD, TOO. BUT THE PROVIDERS WARNED OF PROBLEMS, AND SURE ENOUGH, WE NOW HAVE WAITING LISTS, DELAYS,

CASELOADS THAT HAVE DOUBLED, AND A HOST OF OTHER PROBLEMS. ONE BROOKLYN CASE-MANAGEMENT AGENCY HAS FOUND ITSELF WITH A CASELOAD NEARLY TWICE AS BIG AS EXPECTED. THE AGENCY BID ON A CONTRACT TO SERVE 700 SENIORS, BUT HAS ENDED UP WITH 1,300. DFTA HAS SAID, ESSENTIALLY, TOO BAD, YOU HAVE TO SERVE THEM ANYWAY. AND SORRY, BUT WE DON'T HAVE ANY MORE MONEY TO GIVE YOU.

DFTA HAS NOW REORGANIZED THE DELIVERY OF MEALS ON WHEELS, AND WE WILL SOON FIND OUT HOW WELL THAT WORKS. THERE MAY BE A FEW KINKS, OR THERE MAY BE BIG PROBLEMS, BUT WE WON'T KNOW UNTIL THE NEW CONTRACTS GET GOING. AND NOW, BEFORE THE CASE-MANAGEMENT ISSUES ARE SOLVED—BEFORE THE MEALS ON WHEELS ISSUES APPEAR AND CAN BE SOLVED—THIS ADMINISTRATION WANTS TO REORGANIZE YET ANOTHER PART OF THE SENIOR SYSTEM.

I SAY FUHGEDDABOUDIT! THERE HAS GOT TO BE AN END TO THIS PROCESS, ALL THIS CHANGE FOR CHANGE'S SAKE—ALL TO SATISFY THE WISHES OF A CENTRAL-PLANNING ZEALOT. WE ARE TIRED OF CHANGE FOR CHANGE'S SAKE—AND THOSE CITY ADMINISTRATORS WHO BELIEVE THEY KNOW WHAT'S BEST FOR US.

SENIOR CITIZENS ARE THE BACKBONE OF OUR CITY, AND THEY DESERVE THE BEST WE CAN GIVE THEM, EVEN IN TIMES OF ECONOMIC CRISIS. THEIR WORLD HAS BEEN SHAKEN BY ALL THESE CHANGES SO FAR, AND WE ABSOLUTELY MUST LET THE DUST SETTLE BEFORE MAKING STILL MORE CHANGES. WE CANNOT UPEND YET ANOTHER PILLAR OF SENIOR SERVICES IN NEW YORK CITY.

THANK YOU FOR HOLDING THIS HEARING. I AM CONFIDENT THAT YOU WILL COMMUNICATE MY CONCERNS—AND YOURS—TO THE APPROPRIATE DEPUTY MAYOR, AND TO DFTA. WITH SO MANY OTHER PRESSING ISSUES FACING OUR CITY, SURELY THIS REORGANIZATION CAN WAIT FOR ANOTHER DAY. THAT IS WHY I AM CALLING ON DFTA TO RESCIND THIS RFP, AND TO WORK WITH SENIOR PROVIDERS AND ELECTED OFFICIALS TO CRAFT A PLAN THAT WILL TRULY WORK FOR OUR CITY'S SENIORS.