

STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF THE BRIARWOOD COMMUNITY IN RESPONSE TO THE PLAN TO BUILD A NEW QUEENS JAIL

Introduction

Briarwood is a very diverse, middle class neighborhood that sits between Kew Gardens and Jamaica. Our neighborhood is one of apartment buildings that rarely exceed six floors, private homes and storefront, mostly immigrant-owned small businesses.

Although the massive, high-rise “borough-based” Jail that the City wants to build over the municipal parking lot behind Queens Borough Hall would be a stone’s throw away from Briarwood, would tower over our community and have a great impact on the families that live here, Briarwood has been an after-thought in the City’s considerations of building this facility – as if our neighborhood did not exist. (A map depicting the proposed site of the Jail, its location relative to Briarwood and the borders of the Community Boards for the neighborhoods near the build site is attached.)

There has been zero meaningful outreach by the City to Briarwood. Indeed, the Briarwood community activists that have been attending meetings since November 2018 of the so-called Queens Advisory Committee only learned of the existence of a community “advisory” process after being informed of it by Kew Gardens activists. This statement is submitted by Briarwood Speaks Up, on behalf of the Briarwood community, to express our concerns and objections relating to the Jail and to demand that the City engage in a respectful discussion with our community. This opportunity has thus far been denied to us by the City.

Theme 1: Proposed Location, Height & Size

The Briarwood community vehemently opposes the site and size of the proposed Queens Jail.

The Jail would be located in Kew Gardens, right on the border of Briarwood, and in close proximity to Forest Hills. It would be a very short walk from the Jail to the residential heart of Briarwood, to apartment buildings and houses, a shelter for families run by the Salvation Army, Hoover Park and the adjoining playground and recreational areas, Archbishop Molloy High School and the Briarwood branch of the Queens Library. The unfathomably massive scale and scope of the Jail – **two towers of 310 feet tall (30 stories) each, 2 million square feet in area**, a total of more than 1500 beds, and a 24-hour Department of Corrections medical facility – are completely inappropriate for the surrounding low-rise residential communities of Briarwood and Kew Gardens.

Any jail facility that the City could conceivably impose on our communities should be nothing close to this size, which would overwhelm the local streetscapes, transportation network and infrastructure.

In this regard, the City must heed the Lippman Commission Report, which the City has purported to rely on in it formulating its plan to close the jails on Rikers Island and erect borough-based jails. The Report stated:

“Designed to meet the reduced jail population in years ahead, the system should have a capacity of 5,500 beds, with each facility proportional in size to the number of people held from that borough.” (Emphasis added).

In conceiving of this Mega Jail, it appears that the City has failed to accurately calculate the proportion of Queens residents who make up the Rikers jail population.

Theme 2: Process

The City's proposed choice for the Queens Jail further flies in the face of another key recommendation of the Lippman Commission Report; namely:

“Community Involvement: Conversations with local communities concerning potential locations for the jails must begin early and the City must ensure that the process is as fair, transparent, and responsive to community concerns as possible. The new jails should be integrated into their surrounding neighborhoods, both in terms of design and uses. Benefits to communities such as new community meeting spaces and services or retail space for local businesses should be incorporated into each facility.”

The Lippman Commission Report, Executive Summary, page 18, emphasis added.

Indeed, the head of the Commission, former New York State Chief Judge Jonathan Lippman, has recently stated that high-rise, high-density Mega Jails, as the City proposes, were NOT what the Commission had in mind, and that they are inappropriate for the borough-based jail model. And the Queens and Bronx Borough Presidents very recently expressed their concern that the City is not truly engaging with affected communities in the planning process.

We see no benefits to the Briarwood and Kew Gardens communities of building an enormous jail facility that will radically and permanently alter the characters of our neighborhoods, for the worse. It goes without saying that the years-long construction process alone will cause tremendous disruption to our communities.

The City's so-called "advisory process" was implemented long after the City came up with its borough-based Jail plan and hired outside consultants for the alleged purpose of engaging the affected communities. The Lippman Commission Report was issued in spring 2017. The Commission did not include advocates for those communities. The Queens Advisory Committee meetings did not begin until November 2018. The City's long delay in bringing Briarwood and Kew Gardens residents into the loop, its perfunctory and shallow engagement with the affected Queens communities, refusal/inability to answer our questions about basic elements of the Jail and its hurry to certify its application to build the Queens Jail (and similar facilities in Brooklyn, the Bronx and Manhattan) at a March 25, 2019 City Planning Commission meeting all demonstrate a lack of good faith and do nothing to engender the trust of our communities. Why such unseemly haste for projects of this complexity? Why this poorly planned rush?

The Queens advisory process has been superficial and on the City's part, dishonest. Rather than the open, respectful community-collaborative dialogue that the Lippman Commission envisioned, the City has propounded an opaque, arrogant and undemocratic process, designed to merely go through the illusion of obtaining community input, while actually imposing its will upon the affected communities. The City's attitude thus far has been "we are going to build this Jail as we see fit in your neighborhood and your concerns mean nothing. Now, what color do want us to paint it?"

On behalf of the Briarwood community, Briarwood Speaks Up demands that the City halt its current plan to build borough-based jails and begin the planning process anew. We also believe that the City should not discuss building expensive new jails without, at the same time, preparing and implementing a multi-year budget strategy and plan that would cover the maintenance of any new facilities. This must be done to prevent the jails from being poorly operated and falling into deterioration due to a failure to maintain and/or make repairs to any new facilities - such as what the City allowed to happen to NYCHA housing.

Theme 3: Criminal Justice Reform

Criminal justice reform and the construction of a 310 feet tall, 2 million square feet Mega Jail housing 1,500 detainees are two distinct things. And an opposition to a Mega Jail in a residential community is not an opposition to criminal justice reform.

Criminal justice reform is a multi-faceted, complex issue that requires transforming how we manage and deliver mental health care, treat drug and alcohol addiction, and provide access to affordable housing and quality education to all New York City residents. These are all inextricably connected to achieving true criminal justice reform, in that improving the quality and delivery of these essential services will keep many individuals from entering the criminal justice system in the first place. Briarwood Speaks Up believes that the billions of taxpayer dollars proposed for this project would be much better spent investing in improving the delivery of these services.

It is also counterintuitive to try to intelligently discuss construction of borough-based jails while various reforms to the laws, policies, and practices governing the criminal justice system are pending implementation, as these will significantly impact the size of the jail populations.

Finally, Briarwood Speaks Up believes that any planned new jails must be carefully designed, in their architecture, culture and policies, to treat detainees in a humane manner. They should include provisions for ample recreational space and abundant educational and vocational programs.