



# **A Charter for Housing Equity**

## Five Reforms for a Fairer and More Affordable NYC

February 2025

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# Letter from the Executive Director

When we talk about housing in New York City—how many homes we need, how tall a building can be, or the intricacies of land use—it’s easy to lose sight of what’s truly at stake. Yet behind every statistic and zoning regulation are real people: families deciding whether to pay for groceries or rent, neighbors fearful of being priced out, and new arrivals doubling up with friends because they can’t find an affordable place on their own.

All too often, these families sacrifice basics like healthcare and education just to keep a roof over their heads, while longstanding neighborhoods lose diversity and vitality as residents are pushed out. Meanwhile, the process through which we plan and build housing remains riddled with structural inequities, fueling exclusion and scarcity. As a result, most New Yorkers struggle to find safe, affordable homes—deepening economic and racial disparities across the city.


For too long, these practices—from where housing is constructed to whose voices carry weight in the land use process—have stacked the deck against those most in need. Addressing

these systemic barriers demands a closer look at our governance structures, including the City Charter, which shapes the frameworks for how and where housing is built.

With two independent Charter Revision Commissions now underway, we have a rare chance to reform these frameworks so every New Yorker has a fair shot at living where they choose. And with housing production at historic lows, we cannot afford to ignore any tool—especially the Charter—that could make New York more livable for all.

This report lays out five specific recommendations for the Charter Revision Commissions to explore, guiding us toward a future where everyone can find a place to call home, regardless of income or background. Together, let’s ensure New York remains a city of opportunity, compassion, and growth for generations to come.

Onward,



**Annemarie Gray**  
Executive Director, Open New York  
February 2025

# Introduction

New York City's housing affordability crisis is rooted in the fact that we simply do not build enough homes. Displacement, exclusion, inequality, tenant harassment, and homelessness are all exacerbated by our dire housing shortage. For far too long, many of the most well-resourced parts of the city have been essentially off-limits to new homes, driving up rents and reinforcing long-standing patterns of segregation. While New York's leaders are finally beginning to recognize this shortage and take steps to correct decades of underbuilding, we have a long way to go to truly fix the laws, processes, and practices that uphold our status quo of housing scarcity.

New York City's Charter plays a powerful role in our city's governance and, accordingly, the lives of everyday New Yorkers. This year, New

Yorkers have the chance to weigh in on two independent Charter Revision Commissions that can help the City better respond to long-standing challenges. Open New York's expertise and focus are centered on the processes that affect where and how much new housing is built. Accordingly, our recommendations below highlight five areas where we as New Yorkers can choose to change the Charter to build a fairer and more affordable city.

We look forward to working with many other organizations across the five boroughs to push forward necessary changes to the Charter, so the City of New York can have a 21st century government that serves all of its residents fairly, effectively, and with dignity.



# What is the NYC Charter and what does it have to do with housing affordability?

New York City's local constitution is the [Charter](#). It begins with a statement of our ideals and values, and it provides the foundation for how our government operates: creating the powers that our elected officials have, the responsibilities that our City agencies are tasked with, and the process by which the rules governing our land are changed.

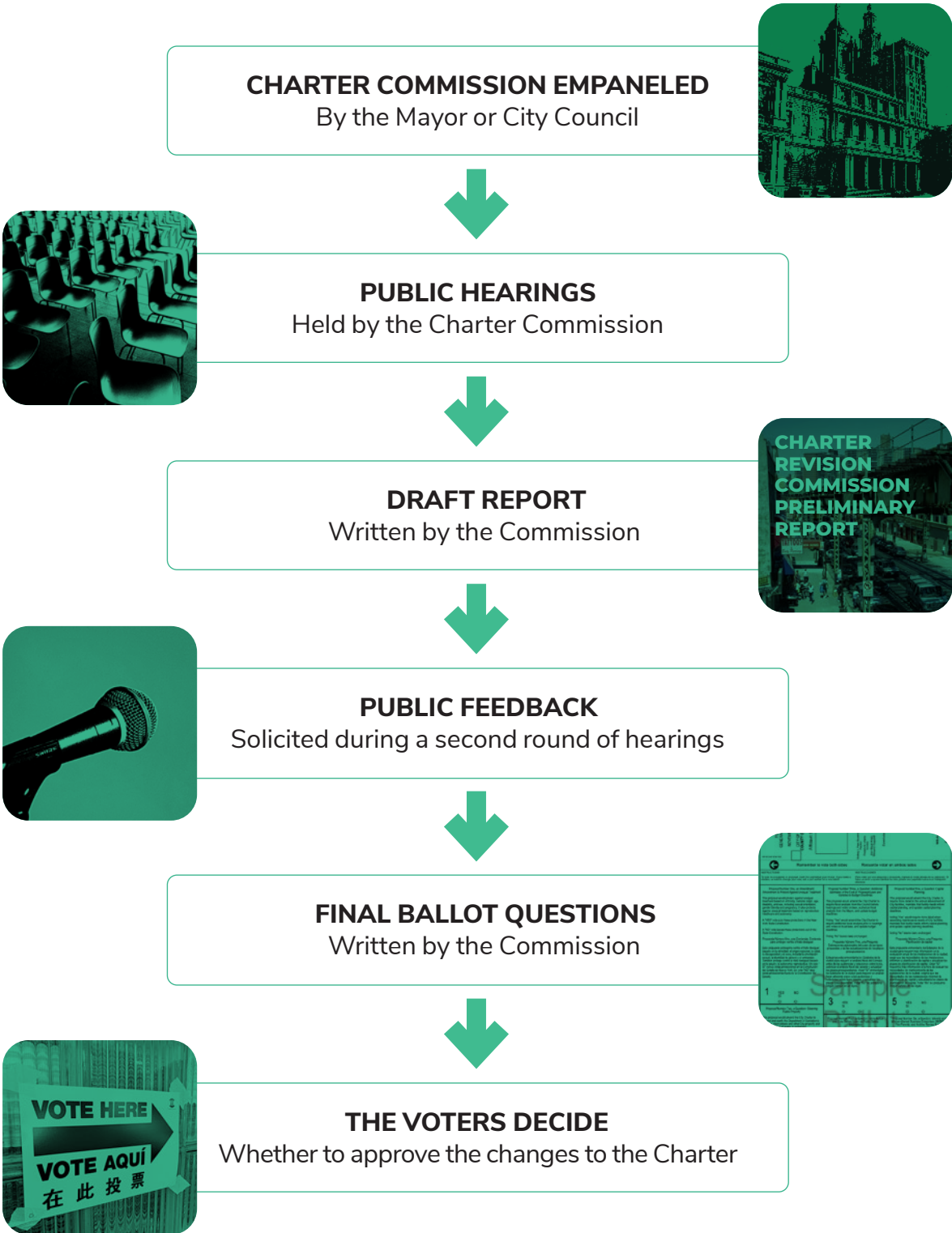
Together, these powers, responsibilities, and processes deeply influence how much housing is built in New York City, whether homes are properly constructed and maintained, and where public land lays fallow or is transformed into a thriving community asset. With the city experiencing its worst housing [shortage](#) in 50 years, there is widespread recognition among politicians and the public that the Charter does not include the right tools for solving our longstanding and worsening housing emergency.

While the Charter may be easier to amend than the U.S. Constitution, doing so is not a simple task that is taken lightly. One way that it can be

amended is by organizing a Charter Revision Commission, which is a term-limited group of appointed individuals who must review the entire document and propose changes to New Yorkers for a vote at a general election. Both the [Mayor](#) and the [Council](#) have organized commissions for 2025.

These new Commissions provide fresh opportunities to improve the existing powers and processes that have kept us in a housing shortage for decades. As the drafters of the 1989 Charter [wrote](#), Charter revisions “reflect their era’s worries, concerns, and angers, as well as hopes and aspirations.” New Yorkers are worried and angry about the cost of housing, but we can hope for something more than the minimal and inequitable growth that New York City has experienced over the past 50 years. We can aspire to be a much more inclusive, bigger, and more affordable New York City – and the Charter must change in order for that future to become reality.

# The Charter Revision Process





## Create a Fast Track for Fair Housing

Remove barriers to new housing proposals that advance the City’s fair housing goals

Over the past five years, the City has repeatedly expressed its commitment to advancing fair housing, including through the publication of its first comprehensive fair housing plan, [Where We Live NYC](#), the recent enactment of [Local Law 167 of 2023](#) (also known as Speaker Adams’s “[Fair Housing Framework](#)”), and the passage of the “[City of Yes for Housing Opportunity](#)” and “[City for All](#)” plans.

These commitments all recognize that our neighborhoods have grown inequitably over the past 50 years, with some having changed considerably in order to improve the lives of current and future New Yorkers, while others have blocked almost all new housing.

This year, the Commissions should create a new approval process for housing proposals that would advance fair housing in the city’s most transit-rich, climate-resilient, and low-growth neighborhoods. These neighborhoods will be identified as part of the implementation of LL167’s “[Fair Housing Framework](#)”; the Commissions can put real power behind housing proposals in these well-resourced neighborhoods by reforming how rezonings are approved there.

Such reforms are common in other [states](#) thanks to laws passed by their State Legislatures (and are often known as “builder’s remedies”), but we cannot wait any longer for Albany to act. New York City should follow Chicago’s lead and provide an alternative [option](#) for new housing proposals that would create deeply affordable housing in our most well-resourced and low-growth neighborhoods.

For example, new housing proposals in these neighborhoods could finish the land-use review process with the City Planning Commission (CPC)’s vote instead of moving onward to the full City Council and the Mayor. For such projects, the CPC’s membership could be modified to include representatives from the City Council. What is crucial, however, is that the Council Members representing these low-growth neighborhoods would no longer have the ability to block new housing proposals that advance fair housing.

# 2

## Streamline Advisory Reviews

Consolidate the advisory review phase of ULURP into a single process led by the Borough Presidents

Since the City created the main elements of our land-use review process in 1989, the system has been widely recognized as fraught and broken. It is too long and expensive and is often captured



by an unrepresentative group of community members who have the time and resources to show up to weekday public meetings. Local community

input processes for new housing proposals are all-too-often biased toward the status quo by amplifying the voices of those with greater housing security than the average New Yorker.

The Commissions provide an opportunity to rethink community engagement within the Uniform Land Use Review Process (ULURP) to make it faster, more representative, and less reactionary. Most importantly, the Community Board (CB) process must be improved to foster more productive engagement and outcomes that better reflect the diversity and needs of residents.

CBs need to be given the flexibility and resources to engage the public in ways that do not simply pit neighbor vs. neighbor in hours-long shouting matches. Since 1989, local governments and

agencies across the country have created many alternative ways to foster better public engagement, from holding tabling sessions to convening randomly selected panels of residents. These methods should be available to the public as part of CB reviews.

The Borough Presidents (BP) already have oversight over the CBs through their appointment of CB members and have technical land use staff to help residents understand complex proposals. A revised ULURP process should combine the separate CB and BP advisory reviews, bringing them together with additional BP oversight, improved public engagement techniques, and a wider lens than each project's literal backyard.



In addition, the BPs should be required to consider applicants' housing status (i.e. renter or homeowner) when appointing CB members. This change will ensure that CB members are better able to represent the experiences of their constituents.



# 3

## Expedite Affordable Housing on Public Land

Reform the broken process for developing affordable housing on City-owned land

The City is by far the largest landowner in the five boroughs. But overly cumbersome requirements in the Charter prevent the Department of Housing Preservation & Development (HPD) from quickly turning underutilized, City-owned land into affordable housing.

These requirements were created for good reasons, as New York City in 1989—like the rest of the country—was just starting to reckon with decades of “renewal” projects that decimated low-income communities and placed noxious uses in communities of color.

New York City of 2025 is a very different place, with a local government that is more representative of its constituents and a deepening housing shortage that City-owned land must play a vital role in solving.

The Commissions can expedite HPD-financed affordable housing on City-owned land by requiring the City Council to sign-off on projects without such projects having to go through the full land-use review process. Projects will potentially save a year of construction delay and countless hours of City staff time, which could be shifted to pushing other high-priority projects forward.

An expedited process for City-owned land will also support more effective implementation for any new models of publicly-led development in the future, such as new social housing development models.



At 4790 Broadway in Inwood, 174 units of affordable housing—along with a new library—were built on the site of an existing city-owned New York Public Library branch.

Photos: Midcentury Mundane, Michael Young/NY Yimby

# 4

## Bring the Housing Shortage into Landmarks Decisions

Provide more tools to the Landmarks Preservation Commission when it makes critical decisions

New York City is proudly home to a historic preservation law that has inspired countless others across the country and is a model for how we can protect our most important places.


Unfortunately, the law does not allow the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) to consider the city’s worsening housing shortage—with only 1.4% of apartments available for rent—when it makes critical decisions regarding existing or new landmarks.

To give LPC the authority it needs to assist in the government-wide efforts to improve affordability in the city, the Commissions should change the processes by which LPC creates new historic districts and allows development in existing districts. These changes are particularly

important in the well-resourced, low-growth neighborhoods that the City will identify as part of the implementation of Local Law 167 of 2023.

For example, in such neighborhoods, LPC—in consultation with the City Planning Commission (CPC)—should be required to analyze the potential impact of any new historic district on future housing opportunity sites and the associated impact on housing affordability when reviewing housing proposals.

LPC should also be given the authority to consider neighborhood impacts when applicants propose to combine existing apartments in a historic building, as has been increasingly common in many of New York City’s most expensive and low-growth neighborhoods.



34 East 68th Street

The 9500 ft<sup>2</sup> 6-bedroom, 6-bathroom mega-mansion at 34 East 68<sup>th</sup> Street on the Upper East Side had 17 apartments before its LPC-approved renovations.

Graphic: Zillow

# 5

## Strengthen City Agencies

*Enable agencies to more effectively tackle the housing crisis*

Over the past decade, the City has created many new “offices” within the bureaucracy and placed innumerable reporting requirements on City agencies, and yet there is little sense that these changes have improved the functioning of City government. Most importantly, the City Charter has not fundamentally updated the roles and responsibilities of its agencies to face 21st century challenges – even though many agencies have overlapping responsibilities that leave gaps in oversight and accountability.

The Commissions should include significant changes to how City agencies operate in order to deal with the housing shortage more effectively. For example, large portions of the planning and policy work at the Department of Housing Preservation & Development (HPD) and the Department of City Planning (DCP) overlap; streamlining these operations between agencies, or within a new combined agency, would be more effective in solving the housing shortage and addressing urgent climate resiliency needs.

Oversight over our aging building stock and complicated construction sites is also split unnecessarily among the Department of Buildings, the Fire Department, and HPD. A consolidated inspection and enforcement operation with a single line of oversight and accountability would increase effectiveness and reduce the potential for corruption and gaps in responsibility.

These recommendations are not intended to reduce the number of overall employees; in fact, most of these agencies are understaffed for the responsibilities with which they are tasked. But better coordination and clearer oversight will hopefully improve functionality within the limited resource environment that the City faces.







## OPEN NEW YORK



Open New York is a grassroots nonprofit advocating for a diverse range of housing solutions. From social and government-subsidized housing to market-rate options, the organization is dedicated to tackling the profound housing shortage in New York. Open New York's vision is a city and state where housing laws and policies foster inclusivity and stability, moving away from exclusive neighborhoods and unaffordable living. Through advocacy and organizing, Open New York is committed to ensuring that New York is affordable and accessible to all.

To join the movement, please visit [opennewyork.org](https://opennewyork.org)