New York City's community boards represent the city's longest running effort to involve local communities directly in the government. People debate how successful the system of community boards has been, but through them, many neighborhoods have gained a voice in the decisions that affect them.

There are currently 59 community boards throughout New York City. Each Board consists of up to 50 unsalaried members appointed by the Borough President, with half nominated by the City Council members who represent that district. Board members must reside, work in, or have some other significant interest in the community. The Charter Revision Commission recommendations of 1975 gave the community boards a formal role in three specific areas:

1. Improving the delivery of city services;
2. Planning and reviewing land use in the community;

In addition, community boards must be consulted on placement of most municipal facilities in the community.

THE LONELY CROWD

The community boards system has a long history, having evolved from an experiment of former Manhattan Borough President Robert F. Wagner. In 1951 Wagner established twelve "Community Planning Councils" consisting of 15 to 20 members each. The councils were charged with advising the Borough President on planning and budgetary matters. In a very real sense, Wagner's experiment was a prescient response to a well-articulated postwar fear that, to an ever increasing extent, people's lives were controlled by large, faceless bureaucracies. The fight against dictatorship abroad, the dominance of mass culture, and the growth of domestic government at all levels fueled much of this fear. Books with titles like The Lonely Crowd, Growing Up Absurd, The Organization Man, White Collar, and Escape From Freedom made the bestseller lists of the 1950s. All of these books lamented the fate of the individual in a world dominated by large organizations and looked toward a future in which individuals would regain control over their lives.

Big cities were often the target of this type of criticism. In 1961, the concept of community planning received an enormous boost from Jane Jacobs's classic The Death and Life of Great American Cities. Jacobs argued that the immense increase in the size of America's cities, combined with the increase in responsibility for housing, welfare, health, education, and regulatory planning, had rendered sprawling, metropolitan governments obsolete. "Routine, ruthless, wasteful, oversimplified solutions for all manner of city physical needs" were the only possible result of administrative systems which had "lost the power to comprehend, to handle and to value an infinity of vital, unique, intricate and interlocked details," Jacobs wrote.

Many observers shared Jacobs' concern. The simultaneous exodus of middle-class individuals and businesses to the suburbs and the continued migration of those with low skills convinced many critics
that traditional forms of urban governance needed to be reformed. It wasn't enough for decision-makers to have knowledge of programs and services. "They must understand, and understand thoroughly, specific places," Jacobs wrote, and that could only be learned from the people who lived there.

As a solution, Jacobs recommended "administrative districts," to be run by a "district administrator" which would represent the primary, basic subdivision within city agencies. Her recommendations were taken up in the 1963 New York City Charter, adopted during Wagner's third term as Mayor. The Charter extended the neighborhood-governance concept to the other boroughs, establishing "Community Planning Boards" with advisory powers throughout the city. These boards eventually became known simply as "Community boards."

DECENTRALIZATION

During the 1960s community planning became part of a larger, more highly politicized movement toward "decentralizing" big city government. While many middle-class whites seeking greater responsiveness and accountability in municipal government found it in the fragmented governmental structure of suburbia, growing numbers of Blacks and Puerto Ricans sought to transform highly bureaucratic city agencies through direct democracy. Minority leaders and those who sympathized with them attacked centralized bureaucracies for their rules, their distance from communities, and, in the case of school districts, their inability to improve achievement levels.

New York City made three attempts to heed the call for decentralization: the community school district system in 1969; the Office of Neighborhood Government strategy of Mayor John Lindsay in the early 1970s; and the community board system established in its present form in 1977.

The most controversial of these attempts was school decentralization, in which minority leaders were successful in getting passed a law establishing a system of local school boards elected by parents. Before the law was passed in 1969, experiments set up in three school districts ran into opposition from New York's largest teachers union and resulted in a teacher's strike in 1968. The 1969 law was shaped to satisfy the United Federation of Teachers, but it also provided a modicum of satisfaction to Black leaders and their liberal allies who were demanding that schools be managed by local communities. While there is disagreement over the effectiveness of decentralization in the New York City public schools, recurring scandals involving school board members, some of whom had taken bribes from unscrupulous principals, resulted in the dismantling of the system in 1996.

Despite the 1968 school strike, Mayor Lindsay pushed ahead with his program of decentralization. In 1970, Lindsay declared "the year of the neighborhood" and opened the Office of Neighborhood Government (ONG). Aimed at reducing the lack of coordination among city agencies and improving service-level responsiveness at the community level, Lindsay set up eight demonstration districts headed by district managers. Within these "Little City Halls," managers were assigned to encourage more local planning and to improve service delivery through "service cabinets." Service cabinets were made up of officers of city agencies. In May 1972, City Comptroller Abe Beame released a report charging misuse of funds by the Office of Neighborhood Government. That, combined with agency resistance to decentralization spelled the demise of that office when Beame became Mayor.

Nevertheless, the Office of Neighborhood Government did legitimize decentralization in the city after the disastrous school strikes. Specifically, the concepts of district manager and "service cabinets" were revived in the Community boards established by voter referendum in 1975. Inspired by the Charter Revision Commission recommendations of that year, city residents voted to assign a Board appointed district manager to head the Community boards. They also voted to establish district service cabinets, composed of all local service chiefs from the line agencies and chaired by the district managers. In
addition to these two provisions, city residents also voted to strengthen the Boards' advisory powers in land use, budget, and service delivery; to establish agency coterminality with common district boundaries for all the main line agencies; and geographic budgeting, under which the expense and capital budgets of the city were to be broken out by Community board districts.

ULURP EXPLAINED

Perhaps the biggest change as a result of the 1975 charter revisions was the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP) which mandated a community board review and vote on all land use applications, including zoning actions, special permits, acquisition and disposition of city property, and urban renewal plans. The revisions also gave the Community boards the power to draft master plans. In 1990, another Charter revision established, in section 197-a, a process for reviewing Community board master plans. Prior to this change, plans affecting communities were prepared by the Department of City Planning and presented to the City Planning Commission for approval. Section 197-a gave the Boards explicit authority to prepare plans and submit them to the Planning Commission and City Council for approval. Like all plans, "197-a" plans are advisory policy statements. But at the very least, section 197-a obligates city agencies to consider the plan in making future decisions.

HOW COMMUNITY BOARDS OPERATE

The structure of community boards varies greatly, depending on community needs. Some Boards organize committees on the basis of functional areas such as land use review, education, public safety, and the budget. Some Boards establish committees and assign them to the operations of specific city agencies. Still others are organized by area committees, concerned with matters affecting specific geographic parts of a district. Many boards combine all three committee structures.

The district manager plays the pivotal role. It is he who establishes an office and hires staff (within the requirements of city budget appropriations). The district manager's role includes taking complaints, providing information, administering Senior Citizen Rent Increase Exemption Forms, Housing Assistance Applications, and Half-Fare applications. They also process permits for block parties and fairs and may even handle special projects, organize tenants and merchants associations, coordinate neighborhood cleanup programs, and publicize special events. In addition to this work, every Community board plays a role in the citywide budget process. Each year, Boards submit a "District Statement of Needs," which describes the issues and needs the district faces.

HOW EFFECTIVE ARE THEY?

The community boards vary widely in their effectiveness. In his study "Community Control and Decentralization," David Rogers found that boards in communities with higher median household income tend to do better at getting their proposals implemented by city agencies than Boards in communities with lower median household income. This is probably because Board members in wealthier communities tend to bring higher levels of skill, leisure time, and contacts than those in poorer communities. Comparative case studies of districts have also found that districts with more homogenous Boards in terms of board members' backgrounds are more effective than those that are ethnically diverse. Ethnically homogenous Boards tend to be more unified and less factionalized than ethnically diverse Boards.

Community boards also vary significantly in the extent they have been able to influence city budgets and land use policy. John Mudd, in his study Neighborhood Services, estimated that between 30 and 50 percent of district budget requests are approved, with capital budget requests faring better than expense budget requests. But Mudd also found that districts vary enormously in the quality of their budget
submissions and in their budgetary analysis capability.

Currently, only four community board master plans have been approved, eight are in the pipeline, and one was rejected by the City Planning Commission. According to Thomas Angotti, chair of the Pratt Institute's Planning Department, the primary factor in why so few of the 59 community boards have prepared plans is that few have any knowledge of planning and the City Planning Department does not actively promote the 197-a process. In addition, many communities recognized from the outset that master plans are limited in what they can achieve, since they are only advisory. As Angotti points out, "Why should a Community board spend at least two years to develop a plan, and another two years to get it approved, to end up with a document that may not have much legal effect on future land use?"

SOME SUCCESSES

Still, proponents of the 197-a process can point to some successes. A 1992 plan by Community Board 3 in the South Bronx urged new housing development at higher densities than those being developed at the time by city housing programs. The plan provided the basis for amendments to a large urban renewal area, Melrose Commons. A 1997 community plan for a waterfront park at Stuyvesant Cove on Manhattan's east side helped the city attract federal funds for design work and state funds for construction. Also that year, a plan for Brooklyn's Red Hook neighborhood triggered the formation of a committee to monitor bank response to the requirements of the federal Community Reinvestment Act. The plan ultimately resulted in the location of a full-service bank branch in this historically under served area. Even Community boards without master plans are regularly consulted by planners and developers. In the 1980s, Community Board 4, representing the Clinton and Chelsea neighborhoods in Manhattan successfully negotiated 162 units of low and moderate-income housing from the Zeckendorf Company after it had purchased the former Madison Square Garden site between forty-eighth and forty-ninth streets and Eighth and Ninth Avenues.

Community boards were probably oversold as a mechanism for empowering neighborhoods. As is often the case, for those communities with sufficient resources, Community boards appear to be an effective way for local residents to participate in the political process in a meaningful way. Those communities which bring little to the table, however, have either found alternative ways to engage the body politic, or continue their search for a policy-making voice.

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