

Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer
Religious Facilities Task Force
Public Hearing 01/14/20
Bricks and Mortals Testimony

Thank you Borough President Brewer for convening this Task Force and Public Hearing on this important issue.

I'm Donna Schaper, Senior Minister at Judson Memorial Church, and Founder of Bricks and Mortals. Bricks and Mortals is a not for profit organization with the mission of providing creative, sustaining solutions to help houses of worship thrive amidst the costly and challenging landscape of operating in New York City. It's a secular, interfaith, membership organization – some of our members are here tonight.

The goal of Bricks and Mortals is to help Houses of Faith make informed, unbiased choices about their future. One of the important functions Bricks and Mortals has been playing is as convener, bringing together religious, professional and advocacy organizations working in different ways on the challenge of faith institutions staying open - and mission-consistent – in the context of aging buildings, declining membership, and rising real estate costs.

We work closely with the New York State Council on Churches, the Interfaith Assembly on Homelessness and Housing and the 400 Foundation, among many others, who are leaders on this issue in their own right. We have start up funding from the NY Community Trust to staff our young initiative. We have a very open tent and there are a multitude of ways to get involved with Bricks and Mortals, or get benefit from our resources. Most recently we've been working with arts institutions to help open up spaces for the arts. There is a place for everyone. Please join us - as elected or religious leaders, professionals, or organizations.

As has been discussed the Task Force and previous speakers, Houses of Worship are faced with aggressive real estate market pressures, deferred maintenance (due to over use and under capitalization), and waning membership. This is combined with increasing community and human needs in New York, for example, the abundant need for affordable housing.

This is a public issue – a secular issue – because, to a large degree, important human services are provided across New York through Houses of Worship. In fact, research shows that Houses of Worship provide human services far cheaper than any other segment of the community. These institutions must remain viable and maximize their assets, including real property, both for the purpose of survival and for the greater benefit of their community, so that they can continue to provide these services. Additionally, many of us are interested in pre-development assistance in order to fully consider how we can stop gentrification and its partner, racism, by building low and middle income housing for our great city. Alone, we can't do this kind of development; with strategic help, we can.

In order to realize these multiple and interacting opportunities, Houses of Worship need the help from public institutions to do our public work. To recognize the secular value of religious intuitions and that this part of their missions need support to continue to not just add to the life of our City, but also not contribute to gentrification, racism and overdevelopment.

Finally, it is imperative that diverse religious institutions are brought into this process and that their feedback is heard – including in forums such as this – because no one can know the specific needs as well as the community itself. You are doing a very wise and important thing in this gathering. We often say in other movements, “nothing about us, without us.” Here we are.

We are now at a crisis level, and in need of immediate help. We want to invite the Borough President's office to engage with us, as well as everyone else, because it will need our collective effort to solve this crisis.

This very real crisis also presents an opportunity – if addressed immediately and correctly.

From Bricks and Mortals discussions with our membership and other organizations and professionals across New York, we have come together to propose these solutions to address this crisis – as well as opportunity:

The public needs to be educated on the secular value of faith-based institutions. There needs to be consciousness raising efforts on the importance of these institutions within NYC and within their individual communities. NYC Agencies and Officials often rely on religious institutions to implement and reach the most vulnerable New Yorkers, including through shelter programs. Through the “halo effect,” Houses of Worship give back to their local communities an average of \$1.7 million per congregation per year. This is astounding. For an institution like Judson Memorial Church, this value added is many times over – at nearly 11 million dollars per year for every one million we spend. It’s important also to recognize that without these institutions, these bargains – both cultural and monetary – are lost to the community.

Second, technical assistance and policy changes are needed that are responsive to the reality of needs of religious institutions. This means incentivizing the health of these valuable resources and create opportunities instead of obstacles to achieving sustainability; this means recognizing the enormous benefit of these institutions and what it would cost the City to replace the services religious institutions offer. We need partnerships, technical assistance, recognition and staffing.

Specifically, support is needed to improve the financial health of religious institutions. Specifically, helping faith institutions get to create 501c3 secular affiliates and other legal help. This also includes funded support for pre-development for individual congregations to assess their options with a team of unbiased professionals who are on their side.

Two, we need support to access to discretionary and capital funding. These processes are arduous and have very specific, changing guidelines, which are often impossible to tackle

with a very small number of paid staff – even if the institutions is supporting important public work. More funding is of course also needed via these mechanisms as well as others.

And, three, specifically with regard to the new environmental law requiring retrofitting. Religious institutions are not exempt, and these changes are very costly. Though it is in faith institutions best interest to become environmentally improved and accessible (both of which are a public good) – we need support – both technical and financial to viably. make these changes.

Borough president Eric Adams in Brooklyn has gotten very involved with the details of these kinds of supports. We applaud what he and his associate, Rev. Gil Monroe, have done.

Another solution that we suggest, for now, is that government should provide resources for community-based asset mapping, so that faith institutions can maximize resources within their communities and are not acting within a vacuum. This can be done by council district, and could analyze unused air rights, unused or underused space within buildings, development potential, community organizations with space needs and community needs.

Another solution that we could support, once it was studied, regards sole sourcing of city owned property for development, when the City owns property and sells it, it can either sole source the property or put out an RFP. A policy should exist whereby if the City is going to sell property, it should give a right of first offer/refusal to any faith institution that is adjacent to (or could transfer air rights to or from) such property.

Finally, Air Rights. It is clear that locations for religious facilities to sell air rights should be expanded – however, it is also abundantly clear that this needs to be balanced with incentivizes for mission-consistent development. This could potentially include prohibitions on mission-inconsistent sales of religious properties to high-end developers, without a tax that benefits the faith institutions original missions and their secular counter parts.

Religious institutions are at a point of crisis in New York. With the right tools and resources, we can make choices for our own futures, which help protect the diversity of NYC, increase affordable housing and fight against gentrification. Again, Bricks and Mortals is looking for partners on all these points and we would love to collaborate.