

## Race To Represent 2018 A Ballot Initiative with Gale Brewer

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Moderator: Gale Brewer

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Gale Brewer: I'm Gale Brewer. We're here with a special edition of Race to Represent, but we're not here to talk about a candidate. Instead, we're discussing two of the three charter revision proposals on the ballot this November 6, 2018. Charter revision proposals two and three.

Gale Brewer: My great guests today are two amazing people. Peg Green, who is president of the New York Landmarks Conservancy, whose website is at [nylandmarks.org](http://nylandmarks.org). And Peg is also a longtime [inaudible 00:00:46] observer both here in New York and in Albany.

Gale Brewer: Also with us is the Honorable Peggy Morales, a former member of Manhattan Community Board 11, as well as Democratic district leader, and state committeewoman of the 68th Assembly District. CB 11 and the 68th are both in East Harlem.

Gale Brewer: We're here to talk about proposals two and three, which I feel very strongly about. But first let me explain how these proposals got on the ballot. In a way, the story is a tale of two commissions: The city council speaker Cory Johnson, myself, as borough president, and public advocate Tisch James introduced and passed through the council a charter revision commission to take a full deep look at what's needed to modernize city government in the 21st century.

Gale Brewer: It would be the first top to bottom review of the charter since 1988 and 1989 when the old board estimate had to be abolished by court order, and the city council was expanded to 51 members, and its modern powers over the budget, and land use, and zoning decisions came into being.

Gale Brewer: This charter revision commission was given about a year and a half long timeline, with the goal of putting charter proposals on the November 2019 ballot, that's the charter revision commission that I'm part of.

Gale Brewer: Along comes the mayor, and he decides he wants a charter revision commission too. And the rules say, if he wants a commission, it can trump the council's commission. So the mayor's commission, which was charged with discussing campaign finance and increasing voter participation, put proposals on the November 2018 ballot.

Gale Brewer: The mayor's commission, its members are all appointed by the mayor, first meets in April 19, 2018. And meets for the last time on September 4, 2018. In fact, they met during the summer. And they came up with proposal one, which does two things: Lowers the limit on contributions to candidates for city office, and also raises the match rate of public funds for contribution to those candidates who participate in the city's campaign finance system. That's fine.

Gale Brewer: Proposal two however, creates something called a civic engagement commission. And proposal three creates term limits for community board members. You'll see they're interlinked, so I'm gonna start with proposal three. Here's the actual language that will be on the proposal three in their language:

Gale Brewer: "This proposal would amend the city charter to impose term limits of a maximum of four consecutive, full, two-year terms for community board members, with certain exceptions for the initial transition to the new term limit system. It would require board presidents to seek out persons of diverse backgrounds in making appointments to community boards." We already do that in Manhattan. "The proposal would also add new application and reporting requirements related to these appointments." We already do that in Manhattan.

Gale Brewer: And, question number two, civic engagement commission. If it's approved, it would required the proposed civic engagement commission to provide resources, assistance, and training related to land use and other matters to community boards.

Gale Brewer: I have a lot of opinions, you can see from my voice, about this. But let's start with our guests. Needless to say, I don't support number two and number three, as you can hear from my voice. But I wanna start with you Peg, to say that you have unbelievable experience with landmarks, historic preservation, and preservation in general, and I think in order to accomplish preservation you've had to work with a lot of community boards, and a lot of commissions. So I'm just wondering in this very crazy time, what do you think about these proposals? Am I being too cynical? What do you think?

Peg Green: We've already come out in opposition to proposals two and three. And we do that because it's very clear, as New York has experienced an immense building boom over the past couple of years, and as the city administration is upzoning, and neighborhoods and there are others coming on board, that people want a say in how their community and their city grows and evolves.

Peg Green: New York is always gonna change, there'll always be some new development. But New Yorkers want a say in how that happens. And the first line of defense are our community boards. I find it amazing that people even wanna serve on these boards, because I think they're thankless. Long hours listening to people fight over everything. And so I say God bless them, that people are willing to serve at all.

Peg Green: Our concern is that both two and three, however well intentioned, will really hurt community boards, and hurt their independence. They all need more resources, and a lot of community boards really need help when high powered real estate attorneys come in with a proposal. But it shouldn't come from a mayoral controlled commission. They should get that automatically, that should be part of what the charter is revising. The real budgets for community boards.

Peg Green: And with term limits, again, you and the other borough presidents, are term limited, and you make the appointments now, so there is a natural turnover if there should be. But again, it's hard to get people to serve.

Peg Green: So we just think that community boards need to be strengthened. Community boards really need to have stronger budgets. And that these two proposals really weaken them.

Peg Green: And again, with proposal two, you'd never even know it had anything to do with community boards if you just read the proposal, because it kind of hides the fact that that's who the community boards would have to go to for resources, and they shouldn't.

Peg Green: It's also, on proposal three, it gives the mayor the ability to put other powers into ... or is it two? Two or three, one of them gives the mayor other powers to add to this so called civic commission, and that's just an open door. Who knows what a future mayor might want to give to them and take away from other agencies, or other elected officials?

Peg Green: So there's ... well-meaning perhaps, but vote no.

Gale Brewer: I say vote no, and also the civic commission is very vague, so you don't know exactly what it could or could not do. The city council, which I was on for 12 years, they're supposed to decide if there are powers that go to a particular agency. That commission could actually assign powers to itself.

Gale Brewer: And the other thing I wanna say, because I know I'd love to hear about your experiences on board 11, I have talked to some folks on another board, and one woman who's very involved with land use, she says, "I have a full time job, I have two children, I still serve my community. And you're telling me that the federal government doesn't have term limits, the state government doesn't have term limits, and here I am at the lowest level of government, as Peg indicated, trying to serve my community, and I have to have term limits? No."

Gale Brewer: So I know you served on board 11, and you're a district leader, state committee, you serve your community. I'm just wondering what you think about these proposals.

Peggy Morales: As it relates to term limits, I believe that community board members would be lost. When I was first appointed to the community board, I remember thinking,

"This is really overwhelming. It's a lot of work. I don't mind the time that I have to invest. And I'm really glad that the more tenured community board members are here, and they're still a part of what I have just become a part of."

Peggy Morales: I think that there's something to be said for institutional memory. I believe that without that we would be trying to recreate the wheel. A lot of work goes into the planning, the process, the decision making at the community board level, and with that comes a tremendous amount of analysis, reading, understanding, negotiating. I can't imagine what a community board would really be able to accomplish, or how effective they would be if every eight years we were bringing in 40, 50 new members, who because of term limits, would have to start all over again. There are projects that sometimes go on for years. Not intentionally, but because of the amount of work, the incredible amount of complexity involved in many of the decisions that the community board has to make. It would be impossible for anyone who's coming in as I did to pick up where they left off, and actually be able to effectuate any change, or move it forward.

Gale Brewer: Well, [inaudible 00:10:03] can say that land use attorneys don't have term limits. And that the developers don't have term limits. And we all know developers and land use attorneys have been around for more than eight years, and certainly will continue to be around while the person who's at the other end of the table, trying to figure out the East Harlem rezoning, trying to figure out the Inwood rezoning, or all the other work that you've done in all five boroughs.

Gale Brewer: Peg, how long, I remember one recreation center which is actually near the studio, and it started with council member Ronnie Eldridge, and it didn't end until I almost was in my final year. That was the kind of long term support this recreation center needed in order to get the funding. And I think if I hadn't been around, actually I was on the community board when it started to be needed this extra support in order to be refurbished. So how long sometimes do you see some of these landmark preservation projects taking? And how do the community boards that have the institutional memory, how do they help solve these problems?

Peg Green: We say in preservation, you have to be in it for the long haul, because they do take forever.

Peg Green: My office looks down, from my window I can see Pier A, which is at the end of Battery Park, and on the Hudson River. And when, in the 80s, they started trying to figure out what to do with that building, and it finally got completed maybe five years ago, after the city finally invested, and then a private person came in and it's now a restaurant. But decades. Decades. And if people aren't there who understand the process, it's all complicated stuff. I mean, they don't write land use for people to understand, and zoning for people to understand, it would be a real loss.

Peg Green: And it's ironic that they would have rotating terms for the community boards, they're proposing that they all don't leave at once, when this city council, when term limits were instituted for them, there's no staggered terms. So you can wipe out most of the council in one fell swoop in an election. And that is also not good for an independent council, and for good government.

Peg Green: If anything, what community boards are talking about is let's see proposals early. Don't come to us when it's pretty well baked. You know, they should be coming to the community boards early, they should be getting input early. And there are many ways to improve how things get considered and approved, but they're not doing it with these proposals.

Gale Brewer: Another example that would be upsetting is I read the two and three, and again, they're a bit melded as Peg indicated, but it's possible. The community boards do need more resources, we all know that. But one proposal seems to be that if there was to be more resources, then the mayor's commission would decide, for instance, who your urban planner might be. Now that would be a real challenge in East Harlem, and a real challenge in Inwood. And the rezoning. Because is the mayor, this person gonna be responsible to the mayor, or to the community? Right? And in East Harlem in and Inwood, there was a difference of opinion as to what that final proposal should be.

Gale Brewer: So I think from your perspective, what do you think, you know, should be going on in a charter revision commission, because we are going to be considering these in the future in terms of community. Preplanning is an example that Peg just indicated, or are there other ways that you think the community boards could be strengthened, vis a vis a charter?

Peggy Morales: That's a tough one. Honestly, I have issues, and I'm opposed to the mayor having this level of control, especially when they're all appointees of the mayor. I think that would lack transparency. I think it would definitely skew things in the wrong direction. There's no way to guarantee that the people that he designates, or that the commission chooses to be the urban planner are not people that are also affiliated in some way, shape, or form with the mayor's office. And that would be a concern.

Peggy Morales: I think given the ... just the complexities of the communities that we're talking about, and the level of involvement that these communities want to have in the decision making process, there are ways to strengthen it. I don't know where the resources would come from. But certainly the resources are needed, the training is needed. I just don't believe that it should come through this commission that the mayor is putting together.

Peggy Morales: So I mean, we always need resources. One of the things that we were always concerned about when I was serving is how would we get the money to do X or Y? And who would we go to? And the policies that govern that request, and the

guidelines that govern those requests. So that becomes part of the decision making process, and how it can sometimes guide that process.

Peggy Morales: As far as this commission that the mayor is putting together, I don't understand why we need to have another one when we already have one in place. It doesn't make any sense. You know, we're duplicating efforts. We're also wasting resources that are much needed for other things that the community boards can use.

Gale Brewer: I always point out that the city planning commission is controlled by the mayor, the BSA, board of standards and appeals, landmarks, understandably, and the franchise review commission, and so on. So there's already a lot of opportunity for administration to be involved with all of the zoning issues, and all of the planning issues, right? So to have another organization that's sort of layered is very, very challenging.

Gale Brewer: Peg, I have a question. So the issue of historic districts, we are always looking to have, in my opinion, more of them, and more support for them. But how would a good process, for instance, like maybe in the charter revision commission that we're talking about for 2019, which is one that does look at hopefully all the budget processing, the preplanning that you talked about, maybe some of the voting issues that we thought this commission was gonna look at, right? We thought that was gonna be part of the discussion.

Gale Brewer: But in terms of the historic preservation, are there long-term issues that we should be looking at in terms of a charter?

Peg Green: Well, one that would of course make sense is to require that one of the commissioners have a background in preservation. Currently it doesn't, but the law was written before there was professional preservationists, and graduate schools in historic preservation. So it should remain an independent agency, and there should be a preservationist on it.

Peg Green: But I thought you and former council member [Garodnik 00:16:52] came up with a really good way to handle contentious land use issues, and that was with the Midtown East. You know, you got everybody together, and you had landmarks come in and decide what was gonna be landmarked, and what wasn't before it all started. And everybody came away not entirely happy, but satisfied that they'd been heard, and I think that's what people want in New York today, and that's what people don't feel they have. They want their voice heard.

Gale Brewer: Right. And certainly the community board is a place to do that. What we did in, somewhat same in East Harlem, you know, contentious, but there was a facilitator. And the facilitator worked with the stakeholders, so you ended up with an East Harlem plan, and the final plan that passed, zoning didn't completely reflect it, but there's an ongoing discussion, suggestion number 14.

Does it mirror what passed, or is it something different, and how can we work toward it?

Gale Brewer: But this particular commission could undermine all of that, in the sense that it would say, "These are the ways that we're gonna give you resources, you know, this is what we want you to do." Right?

Gale Brewer: So do you think that there are some ideas that came out of the East Harlem planning process that could be instituted that made sense? It was a challenging process, but community had something to say.

Peggy Morales: It was extremely challenging, and we were very pleased with the fact that we had a voice. That we were not just another sound bite. That we were included. That our concerns were being yielded to. And despite the fact that of course the final outcome didn't exactly mirror what we were looking for, it did include many of the recommendations that were made by the community. And had it not been inclusive, I think that would have made for a really horrible situation.

Gale Brewer: And the other thing that was important, just to pick up on number three, why we're opposed to it, is the folks on the board who experienced that rezoning, and on board five for the East Midtown, that expertise should continue as they work toward, and it takes time, making sure that number 14 or whatever, and the open park space or whatever, is in fact instituted, right? And those things don't happen tomorrow.

Gale Brewer: So the expertise, the institutional memory of the rezoning in East Harlem, and the rezoning in East Midtown are incredibly important to keep on these community boards. To me, that's the best example.

Peg Green: The best thing about proposition two is the notion of civic engagement, because we've had terrible voter turnouts in recent years. And New Yorkers should feel that they have a say, and the only way to get that is to ask questions of people running for office, and turn out and vote. So the idea of civic engagement is wonderful, but that really starts with people and communities to make that happen.

Gale Brewer: I am nervous, because you hear civic engagement, sounds good. And some people like term limits, so that sounds good. So we have to point out to the voters, this is me speaking, that it's not civic engagement as you might think. It's civic engagement with completely mayoral control, which you know, this mayor might be one, who's going to be in the future, we don't know.

Gale Brewer: And secondly, is very vague. If I'm gonna vote for something, I wanna know exactly what I'm getting. I don't know what I'm getting in civic engagement.

Gale Brewer: And then term limits, as my friend on the other board said, why should the local grassroots community board be term limited, because the federal, the state

isn't, and I need to have the zoning expertise to be able to serve my community. And if anybody learns zoning in a few years, they don't really know zoning. Right? They can pretend, right? I don't know what committees you were on, but you know that feeling.

Peggy Morales: I actually had the pleasure of serving on the public safety and transportation, on the education, and on the housing. And I chaired two of those. I can't imagine working on land use, and understanding [inaudible 00:21:14] in the absence of my dear friend who served on the board with me. You know, LaShawn Henry is extraordinary. And her institutional memory has really guided much of the process that we undergo as we begin to discuss land use, landmarks, anything that has to do with building, zoning, anything that's going on in the community. And her expertise, her understanding served as a guide for many of us who came onto the board years after she was there. And we all embraced it, and it added tremendous value to what it was we were trying to accomplish. Without that, we would have been lost.

Peg Green: I know that a lot of developers think that the land use process is just tedious, and they want certainty, and whatever. But I think the more people, voices are heard, the more there's true engagement early on in the process, the better off everyone will be. It's ... I think it would answer a lot of problems.

Gale Brewer: Right, I mean we call it preplanning, and we're aiming for that in the charger revision commission that will end in 2019. We experienced it in East Harlem and East Midtown, and the issue is the developers will not have the same once the clock starts at city planning commission, and there's a time frame, then they're very much dealing with challenges if they have not had the preplanning discussions. Because you get the issues ironed out, you may not be happy, but all the stakeholders are at the table.

Gale Brewer: So that's the way to handle this, not being told that you have a term limit, and then you lose that institutional memory. We have turned over 60 percent of the community board members in the borough of Manhattan in the last five years that I've been borough president. Sometimes people, they're not ... they move, they're not as interested. And I say you may have other things that you wanna work on. We appreciate your service. But there are outreach opportunities, we're doing a lot of outreach, and we're trying to have the community boards mirror the demographics of that community.

Gale Brewer: That works. You can do it. So there's no reason to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Lose the institutional, the knowledge about the long term projects and the zoning. So I think this is the challenges that we're up against. Trying to show people that the community boards are a place of preplanning, not to be told what to do because they have a good opportunity to represent their communities. That's so clear.

Peggy Morales: And I'd just like to add, the mayor's commission would only serve to discourage people from wanting to serve. I think that type of control is just unhealthy, and it's really not going to support what it is that we're really there to do.

Gale Brewer: Yep.

Peg Green: You know, I think there are a lot of well-intentioned people on the mayor's commission, and I think those are put forth in good faith. But I think it was too quick. I think most people didn't know it existed. Most people weren't paying it attention at all. So I think the next commission coming up is giving people the time that they need to really understand what's going on, and to have really thoughtful, helpful proposals the next time around.

Gale Brewer: We were very pleased in the Manhattan meeting, and there'll be many more hearings in the 2019 commission, but it went, you'll laugh, because you've been there, from 6 p.m. until 1:30 a.m. Typical Manhattan nights. And the other commission had a very much shorter, shall we say, Manhattan discussion. And there'll be many more opportunities for hearing.

Gale Brewer: But people wanna be heard. This is 2018, people are demonstrating on different topics, they wanna learn, they wanna know what's going on in their community. But what they often don't know, and I sound like an old fart for doing this, but they have to spend a lot of years. As you said, land use doesn't end quickly, preservation is in for the long haul. I say the same thing, if you wanna be active in your community and make a difference, you have to be in it for the long haul.

Gale Brewer: And we all love it. We know that's what's involved. But I think that that's what we wanna say to this particular commission is no on two and three for those reasons. But civic engagement is important, so we have to find other ways to do it, right?

Peggy Morales: Sure.

Peg Green: Absolutely.

Gale Brewer: There are ways, what are the good ways that civic engagement can take place in the preservation world? What are some examples? There are so many, Peg.

Peg Green: Well, we try to have, we used to be able to have breakfast with candidates before elections to ask their opinion on different preservation issues, and kind of see where they stand, or at least let them know that there were people out there who wanted these issues. And we've found that more difficult in recent years.

Peg Green: And I think that we have to be more active. I think people in different areas, getting involved in politics is not ... it's what you should be doing. That's what our government is all about. And so not confrontational, not one party versus

another, but really more opportunities for groups of different types to meet candidates ahead of time, and tell them what they think the important issues are, and see where candidates know about it, and see where they stand.

Peg Green: So I think we all have to step up our game, and I think it's up to the people to make this happen, not top down.

Gale Brewer: That's the perfect example of civic engagement. And you do the same thing in East Harlem, right? You're always trying to get people to be civically engaged.

Peggy Morales: And spread the word, and encourage them, and inform them of what it is that their vote really means, and making sure that they attend town hall meetings. It's tough. It's tough especially given the voter turnouts in the last couple of years, but people are still very interested. My focus right now is on the younger people who are now of voting age, to make sure that they also come out and understand their role as people who have a responsibility to be civically engaged.

Gale Brewer: Unfortunately we have to wrap up. Because ... but I hope that you carry this message forward. I deeply appreciate both of you being here, so I am Gale Brewer, and I want to thank my guests, Peg Green of the New York Landmarks Conservancy, and the Honorable Peggy Morales, a former community board member, and East Harlem community activist.

Gale Brewer: The three of us are opposing proposals two and three, which are on the back of the November 6, 2018 ballot. Don't forget to turn it over. If you wanna learn more about the campaign against proposals two and three, go to [Facebook.com/votenoontwoandthree](https://www.facebook.com/votenoontwoandthree).

Gale Brewer: Thank you for watching this special edition of Race to Represent. Thank, and goodbye.