



May 26, 2020

Hon. Bill De Blasio, Mayor
City of New York
Office of The Mayor
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Hon. Corey Johnson, Speaker
The City Council of
The City of New York
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Dear Mayor De Blasio and Speaker Johnson:

We write to you today to express deep concerns with the ongoing plans to construct a new prison facility in the South Bronx, which appears to be continuing despite the deep and desperate need to provide funding in other areas in order to avoid devastating budget cuts. In light of the expected budget shortfalls in the current fiscal year and in the future, as well as the efforts currently underway to reduce the prison population in New York City, we ask that you take steps to reallocate funding planned for the construction of a new jail facility in the Mott Haven neighborhood in the Bronx towards programs that have a direct impact on vulnerable Bronxites and New Yorkers as a whole. At this moment of deep crisis, our city can and should do more to preserve the important programs that help ensure opportunities for our constituents.

As you know, in last year's budget discussions, City Hall and the City Council pushed through a controversial multi-billion-dollar plan to build new jails across the city, including one in the heart of the Bronx. The total amount planned for these projects was approximately \$8.7 billion. All of this was done despite enormous opposition from local Community Boards, fellow elected officials, and residents who live in and around the communities of the planned locations. While we support the closure of Rikers Island, the siting and approval processes were fundamentally flawed, and failed to engage in comprehensive community engagement, a hallmark of previous battles in communities of color, particularly in the Bronx.

Just a few months later, our city faces massive budget deficits, and deep economic uncertainty, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. There have already been announcements of significant budget cuts across-the-board that will disproportionately impact low-income communities. Given these budgetary realities, it is time to reconsider the jail construction plans. While we understand that current year spending for the borough-based jail process has been removed from your fiscal year 2021 budget, your capital budget still calls for billions in funding in future years- money that is desperately needed elsewhere. We believe that as the budget process moves forward, the City should commit to reallocating those funds for the many of the important programs that provide critical educational and economic opportunities in our most vulnerable communities- including the previously cancelled Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) and the planned expansion of 3-K programming in our schools.

The proposed Bronx jail site in Mott Haven is perhaps the clearest example of why the current jail plans make little sense in this moment, and why there is a clear need to reinvest those funds more responsibly. Mott Haven – a lower-income community of mostly African-American and Latino New Yorkers – faced significant social, health and environmental issues before COVID-19 struck. Now, it is suffering even more than before.

Not only are Mott Haven residents suffering some of the highest rates of COVID-19 infection and death, they are also much more likely to feel severe economic pain in the coming recession. Residents are much less likely to have the savings to get through unemployment or the skills to quickly find new work in a downturn.

It is exactly these types of desperate conditions that can lead to increases in poverty and public safety issues. The funds previously allocated for jail construction in the Bronx (and elsewhere) should instead be in a much smarter, safer, and fairer manner to ameliorate the social conditions that have been caused by neighborhood abandonment, poverty and decades of public disinvestment in our neighborhoods.

It should also be noted that the City has taken steps to reduce the jail population in New York City during this pandemic, reducing the average daily population in our city's jails by 29 percent since March. We commend you for your work on this and urge those reforms to remain in place long past the end of this crisis. However, this reduction also raises the question of the ongoing appropriateness of the plans to construct large-scale, new facilities around the city to hold an expected jail population size that has already radically changed. At the very least, this implies that the current plans are no longer appropriate.

The coming budget discussions have the potential to further exacerbate existing inequalities in our City and in our communities if budget cuts go ahead as planned. The City budget is due soon and your offices will soon get to work in a way that reflects our new COVID-19 reality. It is the City's responsibility to make sure that all New Yorkers, including the communities that are most impacted by the virus and who are the least able to recover, get the support they need. Continuing to fund a capital plan that includes a jail in the South Bronx and not fund essential services for this community is reckless and irresponsible. We are asking that your plan to site the jail in Mott Haven be reconsidered and that funding be reinvested in much-needed services elsewhere in our most impacted communities.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



José E. Serrano
Member of Congress



Ruben Diaz, Jr.
Bronx Borough President



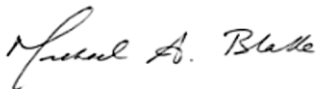
Luis Sepulveda
NYS Senate



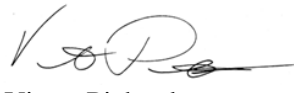
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