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July 28, 2021

**TESTIMONY TO THE NEW YORK CITY PLANNING COMMISSION
REGARDING THE GOWANUS NEIGHBORHOOD PLAN, CEQR #19DCP157K**

To the Commissioners of the City Planning Commission, the New York Building Congress is pleased to testify in support for the Gowanus Neighborhood Plan (Gowanus Plan) for Brooklyn and the need to rezone this neighborhood into a model for sustainable development in New York City.

Neighborhood-wide rezonings have the potential to change the course of a community for generations to come. They have a deeply meaningful impact for the residents of today and those to come following their approval. Of course, writing the next chapter of a community and how it will evolve is a delicate balancing act that requires a willingness to listen, collaborate and advance a shared vision for the future. As such, the Building Congress applauds your office, the de Blasio administration, Council Member Brad Lander, Brooklyn Community Board 6 and the hundreds of community stakeholders who persevered for more than a decade to continue to advance this plan. Today, after years of listening and planning, the Gowanus Plan is primed to become a reality.

For the last 100 years, the New York Building Congress has advocated for infrastructure investment, pursued job creation and promoted preservation and growth in the New York region. As outlined in our 2021 Policy Agenda, we believe the City must pursue rezoning's in a strategic manner, ensure that these efforts promote the growth of livable neighborhoods, invest in critical infrastructure, encourage economic development, support good-paying jobs and create housing stock for all income levels. With buildable land becoming scarcer and the need to accommodate growth a key ingredient to our future success, the City must take advantage of rezoning efforts in neighborhoods that have tremendous potential for increased density. These neighborhoods are transit rich, are near essential services and in neighborhoods where we can promote equity and economic integration. The Gowanus neighborhood meets all these requirements and is well positioned to advance numerous important policy goals.

Dating back to its construction in the mid-19th century, the Gowanus Canal and upland areas were a working industrial waterfront and hub for shipping and manufacturing due to its proximity to the New York Harbor. With this concentration of industrial and commercial activity, including a gas manufacturing plant, Gowanus was bustling with economic activity. Following the end of World War II, however, the decline in shipping activity in Brooklyn, and manufacturing in New York at-large, led to a mass exodus of companies and thus to a general decline of the neighborhood. Additionally, the Canal was no longer dredged regularly due to increased costs and a flushing station went abandoned for over thirty years. Decades of industrial use and frequently overwhelmed combined sewage outflows left nearby land significantly contaminated and the canal severely polluted. By the late 1990s, the Gowanus Canal was better known as a toxin-filled wasteland instead of a former economic engine.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency designated the Canal a Superfund site in 2010. That became a catalyst for members of the community and city, state and federal leadership to develop a shared vision for Gowanus's future. Since the late 2000s, the Department of City Planning and relevant City agencies, in concert with community stakeholders, have developed specific recommendations to meet their needs across housing, arts and culture, sustainability and resiliency, small businesses and economic development and open space.

Many iterations of a plan for the neighborhood have been brought forth, but none have achieved as much consensus as the one we have today. Now, the City of New York and Gowanus residents have a tremendous opportunity to write a new chapter for the neighborhood, draw upon its rich history to attract new job-creating industries and repurpose the Canal for the enjoyment of generations to come.

The Building Congress is excited to see that after decades of conversations, including in-depth and inclusive community planning exercises, the Gowanus Plan is positioned to deliver significant investments. We support the Plan as it seeks to tackle the housing crisis, which has been made only worse from the COVID-19 pandemic, by potentially creating approximately 8,200 apartments, 3,000 of which would be permanently affordable at no cost to the City with the implementation of Mandatory Inclusionary Housing; a new school for local families; more than one acre of open space and a new esplanade along the Canal; a clean and safe canal for waterborne activities; and new commercial spaces, all of which are expected to generate thousands of temporary construction and permanent jobs in the process. Additionally, the City has demonstrated its commitment to the community by moving forward with the first affordable mixed-income, mixed-use development, Gowanus Green, which will feature 950 units of 100-percent affordable and supportive housing, including residences for individuals with a history of homeless, senior citizens and low-income New Yorkers.

This project will also be a lifeline to New York City's building industry, which before March 2020 was thriving and a main contributor of jobs and revenue for our economy. A recent report by State Comptroller Tom DiNapoli found our industry was the fastest-growing sector from 2011 to 2019, with a 43.5-percent jump in jobs. All of that was brought to a grinding halt, however, when the pandemic began. As the City emerges from the economic struggles of the past year, initiatives like the Gowanus Plan, including Gowanus Green, help unlock public and private capital, replenish the construction pipeline and deliver important community benefits.

Additionally, we have seen new private developments erected and industrial warehouses adaptively reused for artist studios, offices and small-scale manufacturing. Proper long-term planning is best done, however, when government proactively collaborates with the community and all the resources available through the public sector are brought to bear to address generational needs that the private cannot deliver alone. Outdated zoning has prohibited the expansion of more job-creating uses, much so that some users have elected to even operate nonconforming uses in the neighborhood in spite of regulations that prohibit those activities. Also, strong demand for housing citywide has had an acute impact locally by pushing up prices on the limited supply and thus displacing lower-income households. And while NYCHA's 1,137-unit Gowanus Houses is a foundation of affordability for families, it is in dire need of repairs in the tens of millions of dollars. All are concrete examples signaling the need for meaningful government action.

Last, recent trends demonstrate a significant benefit to developing communities where people can live close to their place of work and be within walking distance of necessary amenities. With nearby central business districts such as Downtown Brooklyn and Lower Manhattan, Gowanus has emerged as a strong employment nexus for workers, with the number of jobs and businesses growing in the neighborhood by 72-percent and 73-percent, respectively, between 2000 and 2016. The need for housing, however, has long outpaced supply. Over time, the construction of thousands of units of housing, at a variety of income levels, will help meet this need and bring a considerable density and variety of amenities for both long-time residents and newcomers alike. Most importantly, this rezoning is one of the first to meet fair housing standards because it is positioned near a more affluent neighborhood than past efforts and is focused in a generally industrial area with large underused or vacant sites, particularly along the waterfront.

In closing, as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Building Congress believes that pursuing smart growth strategies that seek to foster equity and inclusion, while simultaneously addressed long-standing needs, are a recipe for success. They will provide both immediate and long-term benefits for residents and for our city and state economies. By working together, community stakeholders and local leaders have demonstrated that we achieve much when we listen intently, consider multiple viewpoints and position the long-term needs of a neighborhood as their guiding light. The

Gowanus Plan has done just that and will help create thousands of temporary and permanent jobs and inject hundreds of millions of dollars into the broader economy in the years ahead – a boost to the city precisely when it needs it most. While the private sector can be a strong catalyst for growth, the public sector must play a key role in getting New York back on the road to recovery – toward a better and healthier future. More than ever, the public and private sectors must come together and invest in the next generation of housing, infrastructure and public spaces. The Gowanus Plan and all its benefits provides us all with hope that best days of New York are ahead of us. As such, the Building Congress urges you to vote in support of its passage.

Thank you.