

Statement of the Brooklyn Heights Association to the City Council Regarding Closing Rikers Island and the Borough Wide Jail Plan City Council Hearing -- September 5, 2019

Good morning/afternoon, my name is Lara Birnback and I am the Executive Director of the Brooklyn Heights Association.

The BHA views this issue similarly to our neighbors in Boerum Hill and Cobble Hill, namely:

- 1) We support criminal justice reform and view the closing of Rikers Island as a moral necessity. The Rikers facility must be closed as soon as possible, and its closing must keep pace with the opening of the smaller boro-based jails.
- 2) We urge the City to implement legislative and procedural reforms to further reduce the city's jail population and to address long-standing racial and economic inequities within the criminal justice system; recent studies have indicated that the population of detained and incarcerated persons could be brought down to somewhere between 3,000 and 4,000 persons system-wide.

The City should commit itself to building for the smallest anticipated amount while holding itself accountable to implementing necessary reforms such as expanding alternative sentencing programs and other kinds of programs that give our youth in the most impacted communities better educational and economic opportunities.

- 3) We believe that jails are neither appropriate nor effective facilities for holding and treating the substantial population of detainees suffering from mental illness and/or substance abuse. We continue to strongly urge the City to draft and release a plan for the speedy creation of local therapeutic facilities or a separate therapeutic facility for incarcerated persons with mental health and substance abuse issues. Removal of these so-called "therapeutic" beds would accomplish two important goals -- dramatically reducing the square footage of the new jail at

275 Atlantic Avenue, while also better treating the needs of this vulnerable population.

- 4) We do not oppose the creation of a new jail at 275 Atlantic Avenue—however—we do oppose the current proposal for a building that is dramatically out of scale with its immediate surroundings. Along with Community Board 2 and Borough President Eric Adams, we believe a smaller facility accommodating no more than 900 beds (and ideally less) corresponds with the goals of reducing the overall population of detainees as well as not burdening our community with an oppressively large, monolithic facility.
- 5) We call on the City to develop a new jail in Staten Island, consistent with extensive decarceration efforts and the Lippman Commission’s report, which recommended that new jails be close to the families of detainees and to courts.
- 6) Finally, the community must have substantial input into the design and plans for the building being proposed. What will the building look like? How will delivery and transfer operations work and can they be done in such a way as to minimize visibility from the street? How will the Atlantic Ave façade be activated?

We urge the Council to join our push for more information about these critical design elements and address these issues in its vote so we can move forward in the most responsible and effective way possible.

Respectfully Submitted,

Brooklyn Heights Association
Lara Birnback
Executive Director