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50 Ideas

Center *for an*
Urban
Future

For a **stronger**
and **more equitable**

Queens

THOMAS & JEANNE
 **ELMEZZI**
foundation

Center *for an* Urban Future

50 Ideas for a Stronger and More Equitable Queens is a publication of the Center for an Urban Future. Researched and written by Nikko Bilitza, Dorian Block, Jonathan Bowles, Hannah Joseph, Melissa Lent, Bridget Li, Eric Raimondi, Cecilia Salazar, Anna Shumskiy, Abigail Sindzinski, Sophia Tumolo and Rachael Wong. Edited by Jonathan Bowles and Dorian Block. Designed by Stislow Design.

Center for an Urban Future (CUF) is a leading New York City-based think tank that generates smart and sustainable public policies to reduce inequality, increase economic mobility, and grow the economy.



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50 Ideas

For a **stronger** and
more equitable Queens

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Introduction

IF NEW YORK CITY IS GOING TO SUCCEED IN CREATING A MORE EQUITABLE ECONOMY, QUEENS WILL almost certainly need to play a starring role.

Queens is New York's borough of opportunity. Home to more than one million immigrants, Queens is the city's largest gateway for newcomers seeking a better life. It is also arguably New York's most important launchpad to the middle class, where so many working adults—from nurses to municipal employees—purchase their first home and where countless entrepreneurs from modest backgrounds pursue the American Dream.

Today, Queens has the lowest unemployment rate of any borough, backed by an economy that benefits from an incredible diversity of industries and job centers, including hospitals, airports, educational services, wholesale and retail trade, and film and TV production. It boasts an array of bustling commercial districts, from Flushing and Jackson Heights to Richmond Hill, Jamaica, and Corona.

The borough also benefits from emerging opportunities that play to Queens's strengths. The new reality of hybrid work is strengthening neighborhoods across the borough, as residents spend more weekdays closer to home, and new investments in housing and infrastructure are helping Queens shape the city's future.

But despite all that Queens has going for it today, policymakers still have significant work to do to capitalize on the borough's many opportunities and to ensure that more of its residents are able to participate in its growing prosperity. Queens also faces a number of significant challenges that local leaders and city officials will need to address in the months and years ahead.

Skyrocketing rents and home prices are pushing many middle class residents to flee the borough, including a growing number of Black homeowners from southeastern Queens—dealing a blow to one of the borough's greatest strengths. Queens is uniquely exposed to the risks of climate change, due to the borough's 113 miles of coastline and inadequate sewer infrastructure in many neighborhoods. Queens is home to more older adults—403,000 residents ages 65 and older—than any other county in the state, many of whom are struggling with housing affordability, financial security, and social isolation. Of all the boroughs, Queens also has the highest share of residents without health insurance, and the second-lowest college attainment rate.

Transportation options are limited in large swaths of the borough, leaving residents with some of the longest commutes in the city. And despite a strong overall economy, Queens lags behind Manhattan and Brooklyn in becoming a hub for jobs in the fast-growing tech sector. The borough will also need considerably more help in absorbing and integrating the newest New Yorkers; it is currently home to more migrants—and more undocumented immigrants overall—than any other borough.

There is already broad agreement among local leaders that addressing the borough's biggest challenges, taking advantage of its many opportunities, and laying the foundation for a stronger and more equitable borough will require bold action and forward-thinking ideas. However, there is much less understanding of what specific steps should be taken. This report aims to fill that gap.

The report—the third in a series by the Center for an Urban Future that sets forth concrete ideas for bolstering each of the five boroughs—presents 50 bold policy ideas for what Mayor Adams, the City Council, Queens Borough President Richards, and other city leaders can do to create a stronger, more equitable Queens.

The 50 ideas in this report—a joint project between the Center for an Urban Future and the Queens-based Elmezzi Foundation—all emanate from leaders across Queens. To generate fresh and achievable ideas, we turned to a diverse mix of 50 exceptional Queens leaders. Those contributing an idea to the report include community advocates, heads of social service nonprofits, business owners, educators, urban planners, artists, faith leaders, and more. We asked each of them to contribute a single policy idea that would help more Queens residents get on the path to the middle class, strengthen social infrastructure, address the affordability crisis, close racial and ethnic opportunity gaps, improve health outcomes, and bolster neighborhoods across the borough. This report contains ideas both practical and visionary.

Foreword

Since 2011, the Thomas and Jeanne Elmezzzi Private Foundation has been physically anchored in Western Queens; improving economic outcomes for its residents is a focus of its current grantmaking. The Foundation's approach has been to directly understand and tap into the needs of the community in order to have a wide breadth of impact.

Queens, the largest in area of all the boroughs in New York City, is also the most ethnically diverse area in the city, country, and potentially the world. We believe that any solutions unearthed as well as piloted in Queens present far reaching implications not only for the borough but for the City and beyond.

Many thanks to colleagues in Queens for their contribution to this report—we believe that *50 Ideas for a Stronger and More Equitable Queens* highlights the many strengths and untapped opportunities in this borough and offers some unique ideas for long term growth and sustainability benefitting residents that call this borough home. The Foundation is proud to have supported this endeavor.

Sincerely,



Pooja Joshi
Executive Director

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Ideas

1. Host “Celebrate Queens” events to draw visitors to the borough’s unique businesses and cultural venues

Yanki Tshering, Founder and Executive Director, Accompany Capital

Thanks to the unmatched diversity that exists across the borough—47 percent of its population is foreign-born—Queens boasts communities that are teeming with small businesses offering culinary, cultural, and shopping experiences that are unequalled in other parts of the city. Yet, surprisingly few New Yorkers from outside the borough regularly seek out Queens neighborhoods as destinations. This is a missed opportunity for the borough’s hard-working entrepreneurs, who—now, more than ever—could benefit from a burst of new customers. Borough and city leaders could help with relatively minor investments in promotional tours. Last year the Momo Crawl in Jackson Heights, a tour of the neighborhood’s many eateries serving these distinctive Himalayan dumplings, brought approximately 3,000 people to the neighborhood and generated a one-day sales blitz for local businesses, with a relatively small seed sponsorship of \$5,000 plus ticket sales. Building on this success, the city should host a series of Celebrate Queens events that showcase the borough’s unique businesses and cultural assets, stimulate much-needed commerce for small businesses, and foster more community for residents. NYC Tourism + Conventions, New York City Small Business Services, Borough President Richards, local business organizations, and private partners could work together to organize a Bollywood or Korean film festival in Jackson Heights or Flushing, enhanced street fairs celebrating Italian and Greek heritage in Astoria, or highlight cultural institutions such as The Noguchi Museum in LIC and the Louis Armstrong Museum in Corona.

2. Pilot a massive summer school program in Queens to help students catch up from pandemic learning loss

Kenneth Adams, President, LaGuardia Community College

Thousands of young people across Queens are still struggling to catch up academically after the pandemic caused a historic disruption in learning, with low-income children of color experiencing nearly twice the learning loss of white students. While many affluent students have turned to private tutors to address COVID learning loss, that isn’t an option for most young people from low-income communities. We see the impact at LaGuardia Community College, where many of our students who were in high school during the pandemic are not as well prepared for college-level work as they should be. Specifically, many are significantly behind in reading and writing skills, deficits that will limit their career opportunities if we don’t help them catch up as soon as possible. City education officials should pilot a massive summer school program for students who fell behind during the pandemic. A six-week, city-wide summer school initiative this year and next would help young people get back to grade level and boost their chances of achieving success in college and getting on a path to a high-wage career. To pay for it, city leaders should lobby Albany to impose a temporary increase in the city’s portion of the sales tax of .125 percent, raising it from 8.875 percent to 10 percent. (At approximately \$10 billion, the sales tax is the third largest source of NYC tax revenue.) After the two-year pilot, voters should decide through referendum if they support a permanent sales tax increase to raise funds for expanding the K-12 school year.

3. Create new affordable housing in Queens for public servants, nonprofit workers, and other middle income New Yorkers who work in fields that provide a public service

Rev. Patrick O'Connor, Lead Pastor, First Presbyterian Church in Jamaica, and Co-Chair, Queens Power

Queens has long been an affordable haven for the middle class, including tens of thousands of New Yorkers earning modest salaries working at municipal agencies, nonprofit organizations, and hospitals. But skyrocketing living costs in the borough have made it difficult for many of these middle class workers to remain here—and a growing number have left the city entirely. The outmigration of these residents not only hurts communities across the borough; it has also contributed to serious staffing shortages across government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and healthcare institutions. Urgent action is needed to support public servants and nonprofit workers, who are often people of color, in remaining in Queens. Borough President Donovan Richards should collaborate with the Department of Housing Preservation and Development to create new affordable housing tailored to workers' income levels, offering priority to people who work in the public interest, from teachers and nurses to frontline social service providers and administrative staff. Such an initiative will not only address the housing needs of the city's essential workforce but also preserve Queens's identity as a diverse and vibrant hub of opportunity. By committing to providing affordable housing options for those who contribute immensely to our communities, the city can uphold Queens's inclusive spirit and economic prosperity for generations to come.

4. Establish an Institute for the Study of Hate and Solutions in Queens

Frank H. Wu, President, Queens College

As home to a population that speaks more than 200 languages, Queens is one of the most ethnically diverse places in the world. Consequently, when tensions erupt in other parts of the world, they reverberate in Queens—and far too often in the form of hate crimes. The October 7 invasion of Israel by Hamas and the resulting war is the latest example, with the NYPD recording a 135 percent increase in hate crimes in October compared to the previous month with significant increases in incidents against Jews and Muslims. This statistic was striking, but it wasn't unusual: 2020 and 2021 saw significant spikes in hate crimes targeting Asian and Jewish residents. These troubling fluctuations are why we should establish an Institute for the Study of Hate and Solutions in Queens. It would draw upon the considerable research capacities of the borough's public and private colleges, where the broad mosaic of Queens citizenry are educated every day. This consortium will provide multiple benefits to the many constituencies and communities it serves by researching and reporting on the ways that bigotry of all forms, advocacy of extreme methods, or terrorism—both domestically and internationally—impact civil or human rights. It will explore how to translate theory and findings into potential applications in educational curricula, health care, and public policy. We would be happy to play a leading role at Queens College where our Center for Ethnic, Racial & Religious Understanding has been educating the community on related issues for several years.

5. **Extend ferry service to Willets Point and LaGuardia Airport**

Tina Lee, President of Cooper Investors Inc., and Co-Chair of the Downtown Flushing Transit Hub Business Improvement District

New York City has broken ground on the transformation of Willets Point, including the largest fully affordable housing development the city has seen in decades, a 25,000-seat soccer stadium, a school, and hotel. Anticipating the tremendous increase in visitors and the subsequent strain the development will place on existing infrastructure, the city has negotiated improvements to the Mets-Willets Point subway (7 train) station¹ and has expanded previously seasonal LIRR service around-the-clock. However, the city has a unique opportunity to more dramatically improve transportation in Flushing, Corona, and other parts of Northeastern Queens by extending ferry service through Flushing Bay to Willets Point. Doing so would shorten commutes for residents and help attract visitors and New Yorkers from other boroughs to this part of Queens. The New York City Ferry Service currently includes stops in the Rockaways, Astoria, and Long Island City. This leaves most of Queens's expansive shoreline without ferry service. Mayor Eric Adams should seize upon the development of Willets Point to extend the Astoria line ferry to Willets Point, including a stop at LaGuardia Airport. The airport stop would provide a vital new transit option for travelers, and a Willets Point stop will create scenic, alternate access to the area's attractions, while relieving traffic congestion, especially in Flushing. Developers of Willets Point or Metropolitan Park—the proposed redevelopment of the parking lot surrounding Citi Field—should pay for the new ferry infrastructure, as well as a new bus hub in Willets Point, just as they are paying to improve the subway station.

6. **Appoint a migrant population czar of Queens**

Cameron R. Hernandez, Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer, Mount Sinai Queens

Queens has consistently been the city's top destination for new migrants, with 49 percent of the migrants arriving in 2021 and 35 percent of those entering in 2023 listing a Queens address. But leaders across Queens have very little information about these newcomers at the borough level. While the Mayor is managing the integration of migrants at the city level, there is currently no tracking of the number of migrants in Queens-based shelters, the number of migrant children in the borough's schools, the quantity of available housing, the number of patients in local hospitals, and what community institutions have space or are overwhelmed. For example, there are eight shelters near Mount Sinai Queens, and an average of 15 asylum seekers come through the emergency room each day. The hospital is unsure of how to get them the correct services or to plan an adequate discharge to a shelter or hotel so that they do not face further emergencies and need to be readmitted. Some local nonprofit organizations also want to help migrants, but are unsure of what they are legally allowed to do. A borough level czar could help change this. This official would manage daily data and a dashboard on the status of the migrant crisis in Queens, coordinating with housing providers, hospitals, day care centers, schools, and leaders of immigrant advocacy organizations to establish what the needs are, what resources exist, and where there is space.

7. Establish the first-ever Queens Community Foundation

**Seth Bornstein, Executive Director,
Queens Economic Development Corporation**

The Bronx, Brooklyn, and Staten Island all boast community foundations that make vital investments in their borough. These community foundations foster equity by supporting local nonprofits and borough-based initiatives in areas such as poverty, justice, education, health, the arts, and the environment. Sadly, however, there is no community foundation in Queens. The lack of such an entity leaves the borough without a major source of funding for projects and programs related to the betterment of Queens and without a knowledge source regardless of which administration is in office. A community foundation can provide much-needed funding, but also develop Queens-specific research and serve as an advocate for Queens residents by keeping the city accountable to its economic development promises for the borough, including building new projects or creating jobs. The foundation can also help unify divided neighborhoods, and think strategically about the borough's future and its needs. With this kind of potential, the city should help Queens establish its first-ever nonpartisan, independent Queens Community Foundation, with help from Borough President Richards, other New York-based foundations, private sector companies that are invested in Queens, and the relatively new Queens Borough President's Nonprofit Network.

8. Help Queens attract and retain more young professionals by establishing new 24-hour communities in parts of the borough

**Melva M. Miller, President, Melva M. Miller & Associates, Inc. and
Former CEO of the Association for a Better New York**

Queens has long been the city's pre-eminent place for middle class families, and it has more older adults than any other borough. But it hasn't always been as successful in attracting and retaining a younger population. In 2020, individuals between the ages of 20 and 34 made up just 22.6 percent of Queens's population, compared to 24.8 percent of the population citywide. This is problematic for Queens since twenty-somethings are so important for local economic development. Their presence in a community typically sparks investment in restaurants, cafes, and culture. At the same time, companies in the tech sector and other high-growth fields often choose to locate in areas where there is a surplus of young, college educated individuals. Indeed, there's a reason so many other cities are rolling out the red carpet to attract young professionals. Queens can achieve this with much less effort given that the borough already has so much going for it and is at least marginally more affordable than Manhattan and Brooklyn. To achieve this, borough and city leaders should make it a priority to create at least a couple more 24-hour communities in the borough that are attractive to young professionals. This will require enabling new higher density housing near subway lines, which will help ensure that young adults can afford to live here. It will also mean supporting new cultural venues, nightlife, and other amenities that help establish vibrant live/work/play neighborhoods that appeal to the younger generation.

9. Open an aquatic center in the Rockaways

Ebony Beaty, Executive Director, Ocean Bay CDC

Many youth and adults living in the Rockaways, despite being close to a significant waterfront, do not know how to swim. Although Rockaways residents have public access to the beach, most youth need access to a pool and swimming lessons to learn. And, the likelihood that children in Queens as a whole do not know how

to swim is 30 percent higher than in Manhattan, which has the most public pools. At the same time, the Rockaways have been facing a beach lifeguard shortage crisis. Last summer, six out of nine total lifeguard shacks were left unmonitored in Rockaway Beach, and the number of lifeguards employed citywide to monitor the city beaches and pools decreased by approximately 50 percent from 2016. Several community groups in the Rockaways have been voicing their concerns for many years on this issue. The Mayor and the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development have a prime opportunity to address multiple problems as once through including new construction of an aquatic center with an Olympic-sized pool as a part of the Arverne East Urban Renewal Area. Such a center would not only improve water safety and increase diversity in the sport of swimming, it would establish a youth-centered economic engine in an area that is home to five New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) developments and one of the largest concentrations of youth in Queens.

10. Institute an arts and culture tax on new developments in Queens

Sally Tallant, President and Executive Director, Queens Museum

Few things are more important to the city's vibrancy and economic competitiveness than the arts, and Queens plays a vital role in the city's cultural ecosystem. The borough is home to some of the city's most innovative, unique, and accessible arts institutions, from the Queens Museum and Flushing Town Hall to Jamaica Performing Arts Center and The Noguchi Museum. Queens also boasts a diverse mix of visual artists, musicians, and other artistic talent. Today, however, many cultural organizations and working artists are struggling amidst an array of challenges, from rising costs to pandemic-induced declines in attendance. Cultural groups in Queens face especially steep challenges due to limited public support. Queens receives just 10 percent of the dollars handed out by the city's Cultural Development Fund, significantly less than Manhattan (60 percent) and Brooklyn (20 percent).² To ensure more stable and sustainable funding for Queens-based arts organizations and artists, city leaders should tap the borough's many large development projects as a source of income. The ongoing modernization of John F. Kennedy International Airport, the planned transformation of Willets Point, the development of the Flushing Waterfront, and other major projects coming down the pike represent an opportunity to fund the arts in Queens. City leaders should institute a mandatory arts and culture tax on all large-scale development projects in the borough. The resulting funds could support Queens's cultural institutions, enabling them to employ and support the work of artists living in the borough.

11. Create a toolkit that makes it easier for Queens homeowners to make necessary repairs and upgrades

Arthi Krishnamoorthy, Senior Principal, TenBerke Architects

Queens has the second highest homeownership rate of any borough: in 2021, 45.6 percent of the borough's households owned their home. But a substantial proportion of Queens's one-to-four family housing stock is suffering from deferred maintenance and poor environmental performance that can create unsafe living conditions. If these problems go unaddressed, properties may lose their value and become uninhabitable, exacerbating housing shortfalls and opportunities for families to build wealth. Yet it's challenging for individual homeowners to navigate the many systems involved in a building upgrade. City leaders should provide them with accessible pathways to maintain and upgrade their homes. The first step is establishing a cross-agency task force that develops a "one-stop-shop" toolkit for homeowners, similar to Pratt's EnergyFit NYC project, which streamlined and standardized building retrofits. This guide should include simple-to-follow steps for

deferred maintenance, code upgrades, and energy efficiency improvements. Working across city and state agencies such as the Department of Buildings (DOB) and NYSERDA, the task force should centralize information about permits, costs, and energy efficiency and resiliency incentives in a system of tiered, prepackaged options for property owners to choose from. It should also connect to a portal of DOB-approved contractors. Offering streamlined, prepackaged upgrades will help maintain and sustain our housing stock.

12. Offer education at every food pantry

Pedro Rodriguez, Executive Director, La Jornada

Food pantries address hunger and food insecurity, but they can be better used to tackle poverty, beyond immediate relief. Two of the biggest barriers for Queens residents trying to move out of poverty are low English proficiency and digital illiteracy. These become obstacles to finding sustainable jobs, to adequately supporting their children's schooling and to using health care and social services. Food pantry users are more likely to take ESOL or basic technology classes if the classes are convenient and offered in a space where they feel comfortable. La Jornada has piloted a small, new initiative, offering adult education courses right at the food pantry—a place where trust and community are already established. Courses include English language classes, basic and advanced technology classes, and financial literacy, all designed to empower our community members with the skills they need for economic mobility and increased job prospects. Early results are encouraging, with seven of 10 participants moving above the poverty line following their classes. A second phase of the program is on the way with 100 families. Gov. Hochul, Mayor Adams, and CUNY Chancellor Matos Rodríguez, should extend partnerships to push educational opportunities into every interested city food pantry. This strategy is about more than just alleviating hunger; it's about breaking the cycle of poverty and empowering adults with the education they deserve.

13. Create a fund for community-based outpatient mental health clinics that serve low-income immigrants including those without insurance

Myoungmi Kim, President & CEO, Korean Community Services

The city is facing a mental health crisis, and immigrants—who make up almost half of Queens population—are less likely to seek care, despite often having faced challenging circumstances that exacerbate illness. Untreated mental illness has a tremendous impact on the wellbeing of families and communities, and is also often an economic burden on individuals and the city. Mental health clinics in ethnic community-based nonprofits are uniquely positioned to address stigma around mental illness and to normalize receiving care. They are also often the only organizations that provide affordable, non-emergency care to people without insurance. Without adequate funding however, these nonprofits cannot pay for the bilingual mental health clinicians needed to provide high-quality care. Bilingual clinicians are often the only contacts who can fully explain clients' treatment trajectory to family, especially to parents with limited English proficiency, who play a vital role in their grown children's care. In addition, community mental health clinics play a vital role in case management and care navigation, when clients cycle through the city's institutions, such as schools, hospitals, and jails, with varying access to culturally and linguistically responsive care. Mayor Adams, the City Council and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene should create a discretionary fund to subsidize community-based organizations in offering bilingual mental health screenings, clinical care, and treatment, especially for people without insurance. This will prevent mental health challenges from becoming crises unnecessarily, reduce the burden on institutions, and support the overall health and productivity of Queens residents.

14. Help churches and other religious institutions build affordable housing on unused land

Ben Thomases, Executive Director, Queens Community House

Queens used to be one of the last bastions of housing affordability in the city. Apartments and houses were within reach of many working families, a key reason why the borough was a haven for those aspiring to the middle class. That's no longer the case. In 2021, more than 27 percent of renter households in Queens were severely rent burdened (spending over half their income on rent), and in some Queens neighborhoods rents rose by nearly 25 percent in the last year alone. City and borough leaders should make it a top priority to address Queens's growing housing affordability crisis. One opportunity lies in the fact that Queens was built at a lower density than other parts of the city, resulting in numerous plots where it may be possible to build new affordable housing. In particular, Queens is home to dozens of churches and other religious institutions with parking lots that often remain empty. Some religious leaders are very interested in developing the land for affordable housing but find it difficult to take on the role of real estate developer. City and borough leaders should step and play a key coordinating role. The city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development should create a program to ease the administrative burdens of developing affordable housing on vacant or underused parcels that religious institutions own by pairing them with developers and/or providing technical assistance. The program would ensure that the majority of units are deeply affordable, so that more low-income Queens residents can afford to live—and thrive—in the borough.

15. Create a comprehensive broadband subsidy and support program to close the digital divide in Queens

Dawn Charles, Founder, Flvsh

As the leading borough in immigrant population and minority-owned businesses, Queens residents are some of the hardest hit by the digital divide—the equity gap that results from unequal access to the internet and digital technology. Despite the city's efforts to broaden internet access, many still find it difficult to afford this essential utility. This stifles creativity, innovation, and most importantly, economic growth and equity in Queens. To help small businesses and minority groups leverage the power of the internet in the modern age, the NYC Office of Technology and Innovation (OTI) can create a comprehensive broadband subsidy and support program. First, OTI should enhance current services offered. For example, it can expand internet vouchers for households to cover multiple devices per household and offer larger discounts for service plans. Vouchers can also be prioritized for small businesses in underserved areas to subsidize high-speed internet access and hardware and software costs. OTI can advertise these offerings through multi-lingual outreach efforts in diverse neighborhoods. Secondly, OTI can partner with non-profit organizations to provide a digital literacy training curriculum for minority entrepreneurs and business owners. Third, the city should include in the program multilingual and discounted or free tech support services with on-demand and remote assistance—supports which are either expensive or limited from traditional internet service providers. This comprehensive program can close the digital divide in Queens by helping businesses leverage the internet to grow their consumer base and activating the creative potential of minority entrepreneurs.

16. Strengthen the Design and Construction Excellence program to bolster Queens' architectural portfolio

Everardo Jefferson, Principal and Founder, Caples Jefferson Architects PC

From the vibrant streets of Flushing to the cafés of Astoria, the energy and excitement of Queens cannot be matched. Queens' built environment, however, does not always rise to the same level. Although the borough is home to many well-designed buildings, the new developments in Queens lack the architectural ambition and creativity that have become standard in Manhattan and Brooklyn. It is time to change this. With so many new development projects on tap in Queens in the coming years, it is critical to ensure that design excellence is encouraged and supported. In 2004, the city's Department of Design and Construction launched the Design and Construction Excellence program with the goal of creating high-quality, innovative, and inspiring buildings and infrastructure to enhance public spaces in New York City. The initiative has been a towering success, resulting in memorable new designs for the Queens Museum of Art, the Noguchi Museum, and several other cultural projects. City leaders should continue to expand this initiative, with the specific goal of commissioning more Design and Construction Excellence projects in Queens over the next five years. Doing so will not only create several new iconic buildings worthy of the borough, it will boost pride among Queens residents, help attract visitors from other boroughs and outside of New York, and spark future investments in Queens' communities.

17. Prepare Queens youth for the green jobs of the future

Dennis Walcott, President and CEO, Queens Public Library

New York City is seeing a boom in green jobs, with thousands of new positions being created related to the transition to clean energy, building retrofits to meet emissions targets, and infrastructure resiliency projects to ensure preparedness for severe weather events. The growth of the green economy presents an enormous opportunity for youth, who have the potential to fill these mostly well-paying future jobs. Currently, however, too many Queens residents, especially those from low-income, immigrant, and environmental justice communities, are unaware of future work opportunities in the green economy and untrained in the specific skills needed to obtain these good jobs. Now is the time to change this. Employers in the green economy should see Queens' unmatched population diversity as an enormous asset and an opportunity to help them build businesses that not only reflect the city's demographics but also benefit from their diverse experiences and skill sets. At the same time, city leaders should harness the borough's young adults to help address the borough's many unique environmental and sustainability challenges, such as making its shoreline more resilient and strengthening its green spaces. City agencies, including the Mayor's Office of Climate and Environmental Justice, NYCEDC, and the Mayor's Office of Talent and Workforce Development should identify the most promising green job opportunities and work with public schools, community-based organizations, libraries, and others to ensure young people across Queens—especially low-income youth—are prepared and trained to access them.

18. Triple the size of the team dedicated to restoring the city’s wetlands

Terri Carta, Executive Director, Jamaica Bay-Rockaway Parks Conservancy

New York City has more miles of coastline than Boston, Los Angeles, Miami, and San Francisco combined—and Queens alone accounts for a quarter of the city’s coastline.³ Much of the borough’s coastline is made up of wetlands concentrated in Jamaica Bay. These wetlands play a crucial role in safeguarding coastal communities from flooding, sequestering carbon, fostering diverse wildlife habitats, and offering recreational opportunities to residents across the city.⁴ However, the wetlands in Jamaica Bay and across the city are increasingly under threat. Rapid development and tidal erosion accelerated by storms have contributed to the destruction of large swaths the borough’s wetlands. Although there have been considerable efforts to restore wetland areas, there isn’t nearly enough investment to sustain them. Ongoing maintenance and monitoring is needed to identify and rapidly respond to issues in the field, such as replanting anti-erosion plants, mending holes in wildlife exclusion fences, and cleaning trash that collects in wetlands. Research on our wetlands can help us understand how they are changing and where interventions are most needed. The wetlands team within the Natural Resources Group at the New York City Parks Department should be tripled to fulfill these needs. The Parks Department should try to hire from nearby coastal communities, encouraging applications from community members with less formal education but extensive wetland experience.

19. Upzone commercial areas of Southeast Queens as a part of the “City of Yes” to build the affordable housing needed to keep Black residents from leaving the borough

Pastor Robert Lowe, Mount Moriah AME Church

Southeastern Queens has long been a bastion for the middle class. But in recent years, countless residents—including a large share of the area’s Black homeowners—have moved out of the neighborhood and out of the city entirely due to skyrocketing housing prices. The median price for a single-family home in Queens Community District 12 is now \$620,000, beyond the reach of many in a community in which the median household income is \$72,870.⁵ The area’s Black population will likely continue to decline unless new affordable housing is developed. Fortunately, there is a unique opportunity to do this along some of the commercial areas in Cambria Heights, St. Albans, Laurelton, and Springfield Gardens. The main thoroughfares in these districts have substantial vacant land, but they remain largely undeveloped, because of current zoning restrictions. The City of Yes zoning amendments proposed by the Adams administration could change this. If approved by the City Council, it would allow the city to upzone commercial strips like these to encourage the construction of affordable housing. Council Member Nantasha Williams and Borough President Donovan Richards should ensure that commercial areas throughout Southeast Queens are prioritized for upzoning as a part of City of Yes. As an example, Mount Moriah AME Church is developing an 8,000-square-foot lot on Linden Blvd. and can currently develop a community center and food pantry on the first floor, with only 12 units of housing above. If zoning changes however, the site could host two to three times that number of units.

20. Create a Queens Learning Network and innovation fund to address inequities in Queens

Anthony Negron, Director of Digital Programming, New York Hall of Science

Equity is too big of an issue for one organization to address. Queens needs to pool the knowledge and resources of the borough's many organizations and use that collective expertise to address the borough's biggest equity challenges, from the digital divide to climate change mitigation. Modeled after the Hive NYC, a member-led city-wide learning network, Queens Borough President Donovan Richards should convene leaders from across the borough—from heads of nonprofit organizations and business leaders to researchers and scientists—to collectively address key issues of equity. For example, when the COVID-19 pandemic exposed glaring racial and income gaps in access to technology, Queens could have used a partnership between tech leaders, public schools, and an educational institution like the New York Hall of Science to help develop a solution for multiple family members sharing one device. Similarly, climate change is causing severe weather events that are disproportionately impacting people with lower incomes, and it will require a borough-wide convening with engineers, designers, business leaders, housing experts, and others to design appropriate mitigation strategies. The Queens learning network could use the Hive model's three stages of development—first testing initiatives, then expanding initiatives, and finally building them at full scale. An innovation fund, established by foundations and public dollars, would fund the solutions.

21. Incentivize the construction of accessory dwelling units in Queens

Rafael Herrin-Ferri, Author, All the Queens Houses

An estimated 50,000 to 100,000 low-income, immigrant New Yorkers reside in basement apartments, and a large share of the units are in Queens. These basement units come with enormous safety risks; of the six subgrade apartments where people died due to flooding during Hurricane Ida, four were in Queens.⁶ A 2019 basement legalization pilot program has resulted in renovations to just a single building as of May 2023 due to cost-prohibitive rules. The difficulty of bringing basement units up to code underscores the need for other solutions to the city's housing shortage. One opportunity is to create accessory dwelling units (ADUs), freestanding units constructed on the same lot as a home. These ADUs would provide much-needed housing at a grassroots level and encourage hyper-local economic development. Queens is a prime candidate for this type of land use since 25 percent of its residential land is zoned for single-family houses, compared to just less than 5 percent in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan.⁷ Several borough neighborhoods have favorable architecture to support ADUs, such as wide rear yard setbacks—including Ditmars, East Elmhurst, Queensboro Hill, East Flushing, Bayside Hills, Middle Village, Laurelton, and Woodside (south of Queens Boulevard). To support the development of ADUs, outdated zoning laws will need to be updated by the City Council and State Legislature. City leaders should also scale up the state's "Plus One ADU Program," which provides low-cost loans and construction financing to support low- to middle-income homeowners who want to build an ADU—but has the capacity to serve just 15 homeowners today.

22. Pursue new and scale up existing methods of revenue generation to support Flushing Meadows Corona Park

Jean Silva, President, Flushing Meadows Corona Park Conservancy

Surrounded by some of the most diverse neighborhoods in the country, Flushing Meadows Corona Park (FMCP) has served as a much-needed green retreat for hundreds of thousands of diverse Queens residents. Offering miles of nature trails, museums, and grounds for special outings, FMCP is especially indispensable for low-income and minority groups as one of the only getaways from the city bustle. However, FMCP continues to experience shortfalls in funding and maintenance despite being the fourth largest park in the city and even before the significant budget cuts to NYC Parks in 2023. Staff shortages risk the park falling into disrepair, given current long installation times and insufficient upkeep for amenities like bathrooms, weather-beaten benches, and facilities in need of restoration. FMCP is also less dependent on private, wealthy donors and does not qualify for state grants due to its smaller revenue. Therefore, scaling up existing methods as well as pursuing new avenues for generating revenue is crucial for saving FMCP. Parks administrators should initiate more community events such as tours of the famous World Fair Pavilion and exercise programs on park grounds. For alternative funding, the parks commissioner and the mayor should take steps to make it easier for Queens-based corporations and affluent individuals to donate to the park, perhaps by petitioning the legislature to allow a tax write-off for those making donations. These initiatives would enable FMCP to live up to its potential as the “World’s Park.”

23. Build partnerships with ethnic food vendors to offer culturally preferred food at food pantries and in food service programs

Mary Archana Fernandez, Director of Family Support Services,
South Asian Council for Social Services

There are now more than 650,000 Asians living in Queens, accounting for over 27 percent of the borough’s population. These New Yorkers contribute to the borough in a multitude of ways, but an alarming share of Asians in Queens are struggling with food insecurity. Nearly one in four Asian New Yorkers lived in poverty in 2020—with Bangladeshi and Pakistani immigrants having the highest rates—and food insecurity was the number one concern cited by Asian American New Yorkers during a survey conducted during the pandemic by the NYU Center for the Study of Asian American Health. Social service providers have found that many Asian Americans—including vegetarians and those who eat only Halal food—do not seek out food pantries or other food service programs, because the food does not meet their dietary preferences or needs. The City Council and the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs should launch an initiative that partners with local ethnic food vendors to provide food to nonprofit pantries, including the Food Bank for New York City, and other food service contractors. By partnering with and promoting local food vendors on the city’s vendor lists, the city can create a mutually beneficial arrangement: local vendors generate income, and people who are food insecure have greater access to food that meets their needs.

24. Incentivize tech businesses to come to Queens to develop the borough as a tech center

Thomas Grech, President and CEO, Queens Chamber of Commerce

Queens has a huge opportunity to capture a meaningful share of the future growth in the tech sector, which has added over 100,000 jobs citywide over the past decade and is poised to be an engine of growth in the years ahead. Growing the number of tech companies in Queens would bolster the borough's economy and expand the number of well-paying jobs for Queens residents. Getting there, will require new efforts from city officials to strengthen the borough's already-promising tech ecosystem. Thus far, the borough has not fully capitalized on its vast potential to develop and attract tech companies. From a location perspective, Queens is only a few subway stops from many of the city's venture capital firms and tech giants, and just a stone's throw away from the Cornell Tech campus. The borough also offers a large talent pool: it is home to seven colleges, including Queens College, which boasts more than 3,500 computer science students. Tapping the borough's full potential in tech will benefit the city's economy, giving the sector room to grow and helping to ensure a more inclusive workforce. Success has already been found with the Queens Chamber's tech incubator program, which hosts 15 firms across five locations. City and state economic development officials should launch more tech incubators in the borough, loosen regulations for firms to set up shop, provide tax incentives to companies that relocate to the borough; and build the training infrastructure needed to prepare more Queens residents to access tech careers.

25. Plant more street trees along Jamaica Avenue

Kelsey Brow, Executive Director, King Manor Museum

Jamaica Avenue is home to over 400 businesses, serving as a vital commercial and cultural hub in Downtown Jamaica. But with local businesses facing growing threats from e-commerce and new competition from big box stores, city officials should make strategic placemaking investments that help make Jamaica Avenue even more of a destination, ensuring more customers for the area's diverse businesses. One key step should be to plant more street trees and better maintain existing ones, increasing the commercial corridor's overall attractiveness. During the summer, walking along Jamaica Avenue can be uncomfortable due to the lack of shade. Even though Jamaica has the highest ranking on the city's Heat Vulnerability Index, the neighborhood only has 9.8 percent tree canopy cover, compared to 18.9 percent in Queens and 22.0 percent citywide. The cooling effect of tree canopy is well documented: shaded surfaces can be cooler by 20 to 45 degrees. The limited number of street trees along Jamaica Avenue are also poorly maintained, and the area lacks other green infrastructure like rain catch gardens. The newly merged Downtown Jamaica BID should invest more in street trees through its streetscape and beautification budget. Additionally, the city's Parks Department and Department of Environmental Protection ought to create priority designations for green infrastructure as the DOT does in their NYC Streets Plans.

26. Improve sewage infrastructure in Long Island City

Laura Rothrock, President, Long Island City Partnership

No other neighborhood in New York City has grown as rapidly as Long Island City over the past decade. Between 2010 and 2020, LIC's population grew by roughly 40 percent, five times faster than the rate of growth for the rest of the city. The neighborhood also added twice as many jobs during this time as the city overall. There is no sign of this growth slowing down any time soon, with an expected 12,000 more units to be built in Long Island City by 2025. Despite this incredible growth, little work has been done to make sure the existing physical infrastructure is expanded and modernized to support the needs of a community that today has significantly more residents, workers, and businesses. In particular, many of the water and sewer mains underneath LIC's streets were built 50 to 100 years ago and were not designed to accommodate today's density. Due to climate change, the neighborhood's proximity to water (both the East River and Newtown Creek), and a lack of new sewage infrastructure, Long Island City has experienced dangerous levels of flooding in recent years. To support this fast-growing and increasingly vital neighborhood, city officials should invest in an expanded and improved sewage infrastructure. The NYC Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) with support from Council Member Julie Won, can start by assessing LIC's increased and projected infrastructure needs in Long Island City to ensure that the neighborhood's prosperity is sustainable.

27. Pilot floating housing and raise roads in the Rockaways

Jeanne DuPont, Executive Director, RISE
(Rockaway Initiative for Sustainability & Equity)

Queens coastal communities are on the front lines of climate change. A 2013 city report found that 14 percent of the borough's coastlines are at risk of tidal flooding.⁸ Much of this flooding is concentrated in the Rockaway Peninsula where regular tidal floods have disrupted life in communities across the peninsula.⁹ The Rockaway Peninsula also faces a future filled with more risks from extreme weather events like Hurricane Sandy, which destroyed more than 1,000 structures in the area.¹⁰ In other cities which both face a housing shortage and high risk of flooding—like Copenhagen, Amsterdam, London and Portland (Oregon)—communities have piloted floating housing. These are homes placed in low-lying areas or on bodies of water, are anchored (unlike house boats), and are connected to land-based utilities. Remarkably, they rise with flood waters and have been found to be affordable and effective, without significant detrimental effect to the environment.¹¹ As the threat of climate change looms, Mayor Adams should explore building floating houses in the Rockaways as a solution to secure a sustainable future for the area and protect the many low-income communities along its shorelines. Additionally, Mayor Adams should prioritize securing state and federal funding for waterfront resilience, enabling his administration to make immediate investments to upgrade utilities and raise roads in the peninsula, specifically the two main thoroughfares, Rockaway Beach Boulevard and Beach Channel Drive.

28. Create a cultural heritage district designation

**Xenia Diente and Jaclyn Reyes, Co-Founders,
Little Manila Queens Bayanihan Arts**

New York is one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the world, with ethnic enclaves spread across all boroughs, ranging from well-known, established ones like Harlem and Chinatown, to newer, smaller ones such as Little Manila in Woodside. Despite being essential to the rich cultural fabric of New York, these informal communities often must compete for visibility and resources, limiting their reach and impact. Creating a cultural heritage district designation would unlock additional funding and help attract New Yorkers and tourists alike to support local artists and creators. It would also empower and help unify these communities, allowing for coalition building and intergenerational organizing. By investing in and valuing communities' unique histories and work, this initiative is a holistic approach to planning and city-building. Currently, New York City has a handful of official cultural districts: Chelsea, Astoria, and Downtown Brooklyn. But as it exists, this designation only recognizes the contemporary, established art scene. The Landmarks Preservation Commission's "Landmark Designation" is solely focused on the built environment. Neither of these designations effectively highlights the intersection between arts, culture, and history present in existing informal cultural districts. New York should look to San Francisco's successful Cultural Districts Program as a model for governance and funding.¹² The designation should be created through a collaborative dialogue led by arts and culture workers, along with place-based and built environment experts, and economic and community development agencies.

29. Place Queen-based navigators in communities to help people navigate social services

Elizabeth McNierney, Director of Programs, ACE Programs

Today, more than one-in-five Queens residents (22 percent) live in poverty, the second highest rate citywide. Additionally, 29 percent of Queens residents face material hardship. Fortunately, Queens is home to more than 6,600 registered nonprofit organizations, each offering a unique array of services all geared toward different populations. Unfortunately, the process of navigating this landscape can be dizzying. As a result, residents often get caught in a string of referrals between organizations—attending one intake after another and never connecting with the services they need. The constant evolution of nonprofits—from staff turnover to changes in programs and admission criteria—creates inherent challenges to maintaining a centralized, up-to-date listing of services that could be a functional tool for residents. To ensure Queens residents can access vital assistance and their communities can benefit from the breadth of services available, Queens officials should invest in establishing navigators at existing community locations. These navigators would be trained with a broad knowledge of the Queens nonprofit landscape and would have access to up-to-date information about existing services so they could direct residents to the appropriate resources. The up-to-date information would be sourced from a database—maintained by the navigators and a coalition of Queens nonprofits—which would also benefit from a centralized listing of organizations. Establishing a network of community-based navigators would enable greater opportunity for collaboration between direct service nonprofits, ease the provider intake load, and prevent vulnerable residents from experiencing fatigue and hopelessness while seeking services.

30. Invite health professionals into Queens high schools to help more young people get interested in pursuing medical careers

Lorraine Chambers Lewis, Executive Director,
Long Island Jewish Forest Hills Hospital

Too many young people across Queens struggle to get on the path to well-paying jobs that will elevate them into the middle class. There is a tremendous opportunity to change this by helping a lot more of the borough's young adults get exposed to and prepared for jobs in the healthcare sector, which is growing rapidly and facing major staffing shortages. The healthcare industry employs 138,000 people in Queens alone, more than twice as many as any other sector, and employers across the sector are struggling to fill positions. Unfortunately, many young people are unaware of the range of meaningful and economically transformative careers available in healthcare or they perceive this career trajectory as inaccessible. While these jobs are demanding, they are also well paying, stable and provide career advancement opportunities. Queens's leading health care institutions can help bridge this gap. To build a pipeline to health professions and provide opportunities for youth, the city's Department of Education should invite health professionals into foundational high school science classes. The goal would be for all students passing through high school biology to learn about these careers. In addition, the health care professionals would mentor individual students, coaching them to think through various health care-related educational and career paths. This program will create a new generation of allied health professionals who will be invested in their communities and borough and improve the health outcomes of Queens, using current health care professionals as ambassadors.

31. Commit to a significant increase in the production of senior housing in Queens, and accelerate the process so new housing can be developed faster

Stacy Bliagos, Executive Director, HANAC

Over the past decade, Queens's older adult population—65 and over—grew by 113,000, a remarkable 39 percent increase. There are now more than 400,000 older adults living in Queens, more than any other borough. Unfortunately, the borough's supply of affordable homes for older adults has not kept up, leaving many older residents on fixed incomes struggling to stay afloat at a time when rental prices have skyrocketed and higher interest rates have added new costs for homeowners. There are currently older adults who've been on our waiting list for senior housing since 2017 that are not even close to being called off the list. The Adams administration has taken important steps to build affordable housing, but the needs of older adults too often get overlooked in new developments. Given the rapidly increasing older adult population in the borough, Mayor Adams and Borough President Richards must commit to greatly increasing the production of new senior housing in Queens. In addition to providing new dollars to spur this development, there are several steps city leaders should take to make the process of building affordable housing for older adults in the borough easier and faster. They should commit to zoning and process reforms that reduce red tape for developers and accelerate the time it takes to go from predevelopment to construction. Additionally, they should identify new parcels in the borough—including parking lots and underused buildings—that could be developed for senior housing and proactively help nonprofit developers apply for tax credits.

32. Guarantee that 40-50 percent of contracts for infrastructure projects go to minority and women-owned businesses

Justin Rodgers, President and CEO, Greater Jamaica Development Corporation

Queens, a diverse and vibrant borough home to many underrepresented groups, has seen remarkable growth in recent years, however, MWBE (Minority and Women-owned Business Enterprises) have been underrepresented in new development contracts. For example, in the recent redevelopment of John F. Kennedy International Airport, 30 percent of developer contracts were reserved for MWBE developers, but according to the Greater Jamaica Development Corporation, only 5 to 15 percent of those contracts went to minority-owned developers. This underrepresentation of people of color and women in development contracts perpetuates the racial wealth gap and hinders the potential of our communities. To address this problem, the city should mandate that 40 to 50 percent of new infrastructure projects be contracted by minority developers. This targeted approach will foster greater economic growth within marginalized communities, and by empowering minority developers, Queens can tap into the borough's talent, expertise, and innovation that will undoubtedly lead to improved project outcomes and long-term equitable development in Queens. The borough's diversity and promising growth trajectory make it the ideal testing ground for this visionary idea.

33. Create menstrual leave for people with gynecological conditions

Michelle Ng, Founder, Neuemoon Health

Stigma and misinformation surrounding gynecological pain and conditions persist, leading to limited public discussion about the topic and fewer people receiving the care they need. Women of color disproportionately experience gynecological complications, as Black women are three times more likely to have fibroids than white women,¹³ and Asian women are diagnosed with endometriosis at a higher rate than white women.¹⁴ Symptoms from these conditions can obstruct a person's ability to commute to work and complete daily tasks. These are quiet challenges that affect the lives of Queens women of all backgrounds, and that disproportionately affect women of color. New York City should allow people who have proof of gynecological conditions an allotted 16 to 24 hours of menstrual leave per month, separate from the already established number of hours of sick and safe leave that employers provide. The City Council should amend the city's Paid Sick and Safe Leave Law to achieve this. Amending this Law will improve the working conditions of thousands of women while shining a public light on an often ignored health issue.

34. Provide new resources that enable ESOL providers to expand contextualized job training programs in higher-wage fields

Judy Zangwill, Executive Director, and Johan Lopez,
Director of Adult and Immigrant Services, Sunnyside Community Services

Queens is home to over a million foreign-born individuals, more than the entire population of Austin, San Francisco, or Boston. Immigrants don't just account for 47 percent of the population in Queens; they play a vital role in the borough's economy and make up a massive share of the local workforce. But far too many immigrants in Queens work in low-wage jobs with little prospect of advancement into the middle class. Changing this will require increasing the number of workforce training programs for higher-wage fields that are geared to immigrants. Currently, there are few places in Queens where immigrants can access OSHA training

in languages other than English. There is a similar lack of training programs that mix English language classes with industry-specific skills in higher-wage fields like HVAC and plumbing. Where these programs do exist today, there are usually long wait lists. Leaders at City Hall and Borough Hall can change this by providing new matching funding to organizations that already offer a suite of ESOL programs but need additional resources to partner with unions or training providers that have the expertise to teach industry-specific skills. Doing this will help put more of the borough's immigrants on the path to economic security while also providing capable workers to employers in a range of industries.

35. Create a 10-year vision for Flushing Meadows Corona Park

John Wang, Founder, Queens Night Market

No other park in New York City hosts as many large institutions as Flushing Meadows Corona Park. It is home to the U.S. Open, The New York Mets, New York Hall of Science, Queens Museum, Queens Botanical Garden, Queens Zoo, World's Fair Marina, and the Queens Night Market. It's also increasingly the venue for large music festivals, the future site of a new soccer stadium, and the focus of ambitious development plans. It is also the borough's most heavily used recreational park, teeming with Queens residents of all ages in all seasons. But despite the many stakeholders, there is not a cohesive forum for discourse surrounding the future of the park. Instead, conversations are often siloed, with public stakeholders and resident organizations often feeling left out of the conversation, to the extent such conversations are even happening. The Alliance for Flushing Meadows Corona Park advocates for the park and funds important maintenance and programming. It has also made some strides in community outreach, but a more holistic and engaging approach is needed. To build a cohesive future for Flushing Meadows Corona Park, Queens Borough President Richards should, working with the Alliance and other elected officials, spearhead discussions and townhalls that engage stakeholders to collectively develop a comprehensive vision for the park over the next 10 years. By understanding and incorporating the aspirations of diverse stakeholders, today's leaders will establish a stronger and inclusive way forward for the largest, and most internationally visible, center of activity in Queens.

36. Open a multicultural community center focused on bringing together the borough's different ethnic communities

Dr. Uma Mysorekar, President, Hindu Temple Society

Because of Queens's diversity and size, it is possible for people who come from almost any country or religion to find community amongst others from their background through shared neighborhoods, religious institutions, schools, and community centers. While this is a tremendous asset to the many people who rely on the shared language or culture of these communities, it also means that people too often live segregated lives and do not have meaningful interactions with people from other cultural backgrounds. This segregation can lead to misunderstandings, stereotyping, discrimination and even violence. The Queens Borough President should create a new multicultural center in Queens focused on bridging the borough's different ethnic communities, both through regular activity and by hosting challenging conversations related to current events. The center should offer educational, social, and cross-cultural programming for all ages. There should be staff who are trained and tasked with emphasizing cooperation and mediation, as well as several translators and English classes offered. Flushing is one possible location, as the neighborhood is a center for people from many different backgrounds. As an example, when the Hindu Temple Society in Flushing invited the predominantly Chinese neighborhood to use the center, auditorium, and canteen in recent years, a regular sharing of culture, religion, knowledge and food has connected previously disconnect communities in the neighborhood. A multicultural center would do that on a much larger scale.

37. Keep older adults in their longtime neighborhoods by building new affordable housing with built-in social services

Stuart C. Kaplan, CEO, Selfhelp Community Services

In Queens, many older adults are facing a tough reality—it's getting increasingly difficult to afford to live in the borough. With rising living costs and changing medical and mobility needs that come with age, more than 40 percent of senior-headed households in New York City rely on government assistance. To tackle this issue, policymakers need to take practical steps to help older adults live comfortably in their homes. City Council should establish a program for building affordable senior housing on city-owned property, equipped with on-site social services, a move that would ensure that older residents have access to affordable apartments in or near the neighborhoods where they have lived for years. This could include creative solutions like building on New York City Housing Authority property or on top of libraries. And in Queens, a county that ranks as having the fourth largest immigrant population in the country, on-site services will need to reflect its incredible diversity and can be modeled after existing naturally occurring retirement communities (NORCs). Without such efforts, many older adults may be forced to relocate, disrupting the strong community ties they've built over the years and weakening communities.

38. Expand direct cash support to provide relief for families in need

William Weisberg, CEO, Forestdale Inc.

In Queens, more than 72,000 children (about 16 percent) live in poverty. Inflation has been detrimental for families, and rates of food insecurity and housing costs have risen. For Queens to support children, relieving their parents' financial burden must be a top priority. Columbia University's Center on Poverty and Social Policy found that direct cash payments were the single most useful tool to help cover basic needs, and more than 30 U.S. cities have started guaranteed income programs, according to the Stanford Basic Income Lab.¹⁵ In New York City, nonprofit organizations have piloted the idea on a small scale, including The Bridge Project's guaranteed income program to new mothers which was initially piloted in Northern Manhattan and has since expanded to multiple boroughs, and Forestdale's Guaranteed Income Program, a pilot that is issuing \$1,000 per month to 18 families over 18 months. The City Council should build more cash assistance programs into human service contracts, prioritizing parents as recipients. Direct cash payments can cover emergency basic necessities, such as food, rent, utilities, and medicine, and they can reduce financial burden, increase stability, decrease children's stress, and keep families together. In the long term, New York needs support from the state and federal governments to reduce financial burden, including expanded tax credits for families.

39. Bolster vocational programs by better marketing them to high school students and by offering tax incentives to entice more employers to participate

Danielle Ellman, CEO, Commonpoint Queens

College enrollment rates in Queens have barely recovered from the sharp decline after the COVID-19 pandemic—a reflection of several factors including ballooning college tuition and the decline of faith in the economic returns of college education. Credential-based vocational programs are important alternative pathways to economic self-sufficiency for those who have disengaged from formal education or for first-generation and

disadvantaged students who cannot afford the price or time commitments needed for an undergraduate program. To bolster economic prospects for Queens youth, the city should support and promote credential-based, vocational programs by strengthening and incentivizing connections among program providers, businesses, and schools. First, the Mayor should consider tax incentives to motivate more local employers to participate in vocational programs—and to hire the young people who graduate from them. Further, Schools Chancellor David Banks should build communication and networking channels between high schools and program providers—and then present this option as a viable career pathway to students. For example, program providers can be invited to present at school job fairs alongside employers while high school counselors should be encouraged to discuss vocational programs with students early in their studies. Given the lack of awareness in vocational programs, and the stigma often associated with these alternative pathways, the city's efforts to alleviate these issues will serve to improve economic outcomes of those for whom college is no longer the most practical route.

40. Use artificial intelligence to improve college access and relieve strain on guidance counselors of AI models for college access

Cielo Villa, Founder and CEO, Road to Uni

New York City suffers from a persistent shortage of resources like guidance counselors. While the recommended student-to-counselor ratio is 250 to 1, the New York State average is about 350 to 1.¹⁶ Guidance counselors, particularly those in schools that serve low-income, minority neighborhoods and first-generation college students, are under tremendous strain, and initiatives from almost a decade ago to hire more have fallen short.¹⁷ As a result, many first-generation college students are left to navigate the college application process on their own. Artificial intelligence is an easily scalable technology, which could help relieve some of the strain on guidance counselors as a resource to answer simple, logistical questions such as those about financial aid eligibility and scholarship options. New York City's Department of Education (DOE) is currently working with a network of other school districts to develop policies and plans on how to harness artificial intelligence as a resource in many ways, after reversing a 2023 decision to ban ChatGPT from public school devices and networks.¹⁸ The city's newly-formed Artificial Intelligence Policy Lab should prioritize developing an initiative to use artificial intelligence to support students in their college application process to improve access. AI technology can hopefully be utilized to help solve this and some of the many human capital problems that the educational sector faces.

41. Provide vouchers for shelter residents to purchase meals from local restaurants

Jonathan Forgash, Executive Director, Queens Together

Tens of thousands of New Yorkers and migrants live in shelters across Queens. Currently, shelter residents are provided meals by large catering companies, without roots in the borough, creating standardized meals with few considerations. At the same time, there are thousands of restaurants in Queens which offer food from all around the world and that know how to prepare it in a cost-effective way. Mayor Adams should create a new voucher program, first piloted in one neighborhood, that combines compassionate hospitality and cultural consideration of individuals and their families, while supporting local communities. With these vouchers, shelter residents can access freshly-made culturally-appropriate meals from curated restaurants in Queens. These mom-and-pop restaurants will benefit financially, jobs will be created, the neighborhood economy will

grow, and tax revenue increases. This is a win-win-win situation for the people, the restaurants, and the neighborhoods of New York City. A nonprofit partner like Queens Together can organize and manage this program by working at the grassroots level with local restaurants, community-based organizations, and shelters to build a system curated for each neighborhood. This program would give people dignity in choosing where and what to eat, an important ingredient missing from the current city-funded shelter meals program.

42. Purchase or provide space for small to mid-size nonprofits

Nat Roe, Executive Director, Flux Factory

Queens is home to more than 6,000 nonprofit organizations, from social service agencies to cultural institutions, and for many of them, their greatest expense and stress is paying for their space. Small and mid-sized nonprofits, in particular, often struggle with high rents, which can lead to instability and even displacement, which makes it difficult for nonprofits to focus on their mission and provide services to their fullest potential. If the city were to purchase spaces or provide shared spaces for these smaller nonprofits, it would lead to a huge reduction in operating expenses, allowing organizations to focus on their mission and longer-term space goals. And in the same way that the city reserves land for parks and builds schools, these spaces would provide a tremendous community benefit by providing reliable services in stable locations. The city should modify the Comptroller's Directive 10 or Resolution A (Reso A) to streamline the onerous interdepartmental review process for capital funding by granting agencies like the Department of Cultural Affairs more authority over their projects. This change would make the process of purchasing space much more efficient. The city should also create a specific capital grant program that prioritizes small to mid-size institutions, perhaps choosing to purchase one space for nonprofits each year in each borough.

43. Shelter undocumented immigrants by expanding CityFHEPS eligibility

Theo Oshiro, Co-Executive Director, Make the Road New York

Queens is home to an estimated 235,000 of the city's 600,000 undocumented immigrants. Many of these undocumented New Yorkers struggle to transition from a shelter to their own apartment because they lack work authorization, local connections, and resources to compete for private apartments in a city with a major housing shortage. Despite these enormous challenges in finding a place to live, undocumented immigrants remain ineligible for public housing programs because of their legal status. The result is a swelling shelter population, and growing numbers of migrants living on city streets. To alleviate the crisis in the shelter system and support new arrivals in building their lives in a new country, the City Council and Mayor Adams should extend CityFHEPS, which is the largest rental subsidy program, to people regardless of their immigration status. Currently, CityFHEPS is limited to only those people with at least one documented household member, and even in a family with mixed legal status subsidy calculations exclude undocumented household members. In 2023, the City Council wisely voted to override a mayoral veto and passed reforms to help relieve the backlog in the shelter system, clearing the way for New Yorkers who have been waiting for years for a CityFHEPS voucher. To take the next step to help more people obtain stable housing, the city must expand eligibility to more households, including those with only undocumented immigrants. By offering CityFHEPS to all immigrants, the city will open up pathways for New York's newest arrivals to succeed.

44. Create a livable checklist to guarantee that key amenities exist in every neighborhood

Sheila Lewandowski, Co-Founder and Executive Director,
The Chocolate Factory Theater

Some neighborhoods in Queens have more resources and amenities than others. For example, Jackson Heights has just 2 square feet of park space per capita whereas some neighborhoods in Eastern Queens have as many as 150 square feet of park space per capita. There are neighborhoods across the borough with no public pools, no community centers, and no cultural institutions. There is often a lack of vision from city government on minimum standards and amenities each neighborhood should have, regardless of the income levels of the people who live there. Local strategy and resource allocation is often instead driven by private developers, and as a result, many neighborhoods in Queens are left without basic amenities. Amenities like gyms, meeting rooms and pools are being built within new developments but only for residents of those developments and even then, the cost is often beyond the reach of lower-income residents. City planners, the borough president, council members and community boards should instead take the reins on equitable planning and work together to develop a uniform livable checklist for every Queens district, establishing a baseline for what every neighborhood should have. At a minimum, each district should have permanent access to a large park, a community center, and a live-work space for artists. The city can then use the checklist to track if a district does not have these amenities, and use it as a guide for future planning and investment.

45. Create “safety dojos” or conflict resolution centers in public schools

Rana Abdelhamid, Founder and Executive Director, Malikah

In recent years, incidents of hate, bias, and racism have increased in schools across the city, leaving many children feeling unsafe and unwelcome. With its unmatched racial, ethnic, and religious diversity, Queens has experienced a large share of these hateful incidents. But the borough’s many cultures and backgrounds also make it the ideal place to launch a new initiative that helps to bridge differences and make sure that people from all marginalized communities feel supported. The New York City Department of Education should create “safety dojos” within public schools—starting with a pilot in Queens—to equip a diverse array of students with the communication and self-protection tools needed to navigate the world around them with confidence. A safety dojo would be a space in school that provides students with verbal de-escalation tactics, physical de-escalation tactics, bystander training, education on types of violence, and a space to heal and discuss violence they’ve faced without the punitive connotations and mistrust surrounding existing systems. Public schools are prime locations to facilitate these resources, as they serve a diverse student body, creating an opportunity for early intervention to circumvent cycles of violence and trauma—and Queens’s diversity makes it the ideal place to test it.

46. Create green job pipelines for immigrants in Queens

Nilbia Coyote, Executive Director,
New Immigrant Community Empowerment (NICE)

New York City is experiencing a surge in green economy jobs, with a recent study projecting that positions in the field will soar to 400,000 by 2040, up from the current 130,000. But these well-paying career opportunities are often out of reach for the city's immigrants, especially those with limited English proficiency. Immigrants have played a central role in building New York, and yet they frequently encounter challenges in joining the city's unions, hindering their access to stable employment. Similarly, those with limited English proficiency face hurdles in navigating the job application process or accessing slots in workforce training programs for green jobs. Unless this changes, a large share of Queens residents will be shut out of the good jobs in this growing part of the city's economy. Ensuring that the borough's immigrants are a part of the green transformation of New York requires a targeted and inclusive workforce development strategy. As a part of the City Council's "A Greener NYC" initiative, Queens City Council members should collaborate with and fund Queens-based organizations that advocate for and deliver services to immigrant New Yorkers, including New Immigrant Community Empowerment. It is essential to establish formal pipelines between these trusted community organizations and employers who need to fill positions in solar, wind, building decarbonization, and waste management. By taking these steps, the city can help ensure that all residents of Queens can access jobs in this fast-growing industry and are considered a part of the solution for climate change.

47. Celebrate the QueensWay through a new communication campaign

Andrea Crawford, Esq., CPHRM, Friends of the QueensWay

Central Queens is severely lacking in well-maintained green spaces, but that will soon change. The QueensWay, a greenway and linear park, is being built on the unused former old Rockaway Beach Branch Line train tracks, made possible by an initial \$35 million investment by Mayor Adams, and a tremendous \$115 million U.S. Department of Transportation grant, secured by Senators Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand. The QueensWay will cover 47 acres and provide greenspace and a trail that can be readily accessed by the 322,000 people who live within a mile of the park, as well as draw visitors to the area.¹⁹ The QueensWay has been a dream for 13 years, and like all large scale projects, has faced opposition on its journey to fruition. Now that funding has been secured, Queens Borough President Donovan Richards and all local elected officials, should unite the community around it by launching a creative communication campaign that publicizes its many benefits. A campaign should ensure that all neighborhoods in the area understand the positive economic and health impacts of the park, so that people are mobilized to participate in planning, and so that they use and support the park once it is constructed. The QueensWay will provide badly needed green space for residents, boost inclusive economic development, and enhance pedestrian and cyclist safety, and the government is investing millions of dollars to see its completion. It's time to make sure residents across Queens know about—and use—this incredible new public asset.

48. Create a new housing subsidy program and take other action to address the affordable housing crisis for Queens older adults

William Jourdain, Executive Director, Woodside on the Move

New York City is grappling with its worst housing affordability crisis in decades, with escalating costs making it especially difficult for seniors with fixed incomes to retain their homes. This is a particularly serious challenge in Queens, which is home to approximately 400,000 residents who are 65-and-over—more than any other borough. More than 14 percent of the borough’s older adults live below the poverty line, and many others have been burdened by fast-rising rents, especially in Northwest Queens. But too few of the borough’s older adults benefit from the city’s affordable housing programs, and there’s a lot more the city can do to tackle the affordable housing crisis for older adults. Mayor Adams and the City Council should create a new housing subsidy for rent-burdened older adults, ensuring that they pay no more than one-third of their income on rent, regardless of income level or rent regulation status. This would ensure that people can stay in their homes and communities as they age. In addition, the city should create targeted incentives to produce new housing that Queens seniors can actually afford, using average median income (AMI) requirements that reflect local average income levels, and with supports that can help residents age in place. The state has a crucial role to play too: a better targeted housing production incentive to replace 421-a; new investment in Mitchell-Lama-style housing; legalization of basement units; and a push for more housing in neighboring counties.

49. Require that all new development projects invest in local arts and culture

Karesia Batan, Founding Executive Director, Queensboro Dance Festival

Long Island City (LIC) has been one of the fastest growing neighborhoods in the country, experiencing a staggering 40 percent population growth in the past 10 years—five times faster than the city’s average. This growth has mostly come from high-rise private development projects, which have provided new homes to thousands of people, but have also contributed unaffordable rent and to the displacement of artists and the eradication of artist spaces including 5Pointz, Local Project, Space Womb, Cosmic Fit Club, Circus Warehouse, Grand Central Atelier, and independent work studios. Arts and culture is an underrated economic driver in our city. While neighborhood development is inevitable, eradication of arts and culture in the process is unnecessary and provides no benefit to the community. Policies should be put in place to require that any development project coming into any neighborhood must include a plan to preserve the local arts and culture organizations and activity already existing there. Developers should form a relationship with local organizations. Preserving arts and culture could look like providing work or presentation space, commissioning local artists on their properties, or contributing a local arts "tax" which would go into a dedicated arts fund for the neighborhood, administered by a local nonprofit. These efforts would stimulate the economy, establish a mutually beneficial relationship for the community, and improve the appeal of neighborhoods overall.

50. Implement a Successor to 421A

Hal Rosenbluth, President, Kaufman Astoria Studios, and Tracy Capune

Addressing the pressing issue of affordable housing is a fundamental concern for local developers and community leaders. The dire need for housing that is accessible to lower and middle-income individuals and families has led them to recognize that a significant increase in housing development is essential for Queens' growth and well-being. Despite the demand and available land in the borough, particularly in Astoria, there has been a lack of new development. This scarcity of new housing options has contributed to soaring apartment prices and housing shortages, making it increasingly challenging for residents of varying income levels to find suitable and affordable homes. There exists a stalemate where getting approval and funding for new housing projects has become an arduous task, further exacerbating the housing crisis. To break free from this stalemate, it is necessary for legislators to develop and pass a successor program to the 421A tax credit which was a property tax incentive program in New York City aimed at encouraging the construction of new residential buildings, particularly in areas with housing shortages. The program provided tax breaks to developers as an incentive to build new residential developments, including affordable housing units. By implementing a successor to the 421A tax break, the aim is to encourage developers to embark on new housing projects, thereby increasing the stock of affordable housing units and fostering a stronger Queens.

Endnotes

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