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STREETCAR LEAVES MORE TO BE DESIRED

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During his State of the City Address two weeks ago, Mayor Bill De Blasio announced his proposal for a Brooklyn-Queens Connector, a 16-mile streetcar line running between Astoria and Sunset Park. This is an ambitious infrastructure proposal that would reshape the transportation landscape of New York City. To be sure, it could potentially benefit thousands of working-class and low-income residents along its corridor, particularly in transit deserts such as Red Hook.

However, it stands to reason that a proposal of this magnitude should raise some questions in the communities that it purports to serve. This is particularly true in those neighborhoods that have a long track record of community-based planning, including transportation planning. It is clear from a review of this proposal that it was devised with disproportionate input from real estate powers, with a vested interest in promoting urban renewal projects along the city's waterfront. New York City has seen an unfortunate trend in recent years towards corporate-driven infrastructure planning in contrast with the bottom-up planning that communities do through such vehicles as 197-A plans. The benefits that this proposal would generate for these interests are obvious; however, whether low-income and working-class community members along this corridor would stand to see a net-gain or net-loss remains a significant question mark.

Likewise, the funding formula for the streetcar explicitly assumes rising property values along its route, a potentially double-edged sword for those affected. Let us imagine, for example, that this transit line generates job creation along its corridor, yet simultaneously displaces low-income renters as their homes become more desirable. Will the opportunity for a new job outweigh the loss of a home? Moreover, what kinds of jobs is this proposal expected to generate – and do these threaten to replace small blue-collar industrial businesses in areas like Sunset Park? Industrial businesses of this nature, which form the backbone of many local economies, already find themselves in a deeply precarious situation. How the streetcar would mitigate their displacement remains a question that needs to be addressed.

Further, as currently proposed, the streetcar would be a New York City-led initiative, carried out independently of Albany. This is good news for those concerned that state-city tensions could impede its implementation. However, if this project is executed outside the MTA system, would this imply a separate fare structure? Ideally, the cost of that streetcar would be integrated into existing MetroCard fare, allowing for free transfer to and from subway and bus lines. If, conversely, the streetcar requires additional fare, this would inevitably exclude lower-income residents already struggling with current rates.

Finally, as an environmental justice organization, UPROSE is a strong proponent of expanding and enhancing mass surface transit. Given the burdens that climate change is already imposing upon New York City's infrastructure, increased mobility options are critical to scaling back our carbon footprint and reinforcing the resilience of our transit system. A major infrastructure project of this scale, particularly one along the waterfront, requires a serious environmental impact analysis. To do this in a just and meaningful way requires the deep engagement of environmental justice organizations along the streetcar's corridor. These organizations have been working on issues of transportation for years, including both its



economic and environmental importance. For a transit project like this to truly serve the communities that it traverses, the community members themselves must play an active role in shaping its design. However, to date, the grassroots leadership of these communities appear to have been conspicuously excluded from conversations.

In brief, the Mayor's proposed Brooklyn-Queens Connector offers a tremendous opportunity to expand the city's transit network. It has the potential to engage low-income communities in transportation planning, connect the working class to jobs, increase transit in underserved neighborhoods, and reduce the city's greenhouse gas emissions. It is also evident that the streetcar proposal, at this preliminary stage, remains a flexible plan that is certain to evolve. Will this evolution occur through the elevation and inclusion of community leadership and environmental justice principles—or alternatively through top-down planning and neoliberal economic models? The way that we proceed from here will determine how the questions outlined above—on matters of transparency, displacement, affordability, and sustainability—are addressed. Until then, this streetcar leaves us with more to be desired.