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Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform

City Council Testimony

September 5, 2019

Borough-Based Jails/Closing Rikers Island

My name is Herb Sturz. I am testifying on behalf of the Fedcap Group where I serve as Senior Advisor. In 1961 I cofounded the Vera Institute of Justice and then several NY City non-profits focused on social and criminal justice initiatives. I also served as Deputy Mayor for Criminal Justice and Chair of the City Planning Commission. I am testifying today because New York City is close to ending the odious pretrial penal colony on Rikers Island.

The four borough based jails that would be authorized by this application are essential to this effort. Without site selection approval of new more accessible and humane jails, there will be no closing of Rikers. City Council decisions are not easy; not everyone goes home happy. But I also know that the Council appreciates the gravity and urgency of supporting an effective alternative to Rikers Island. No one underestimates how hard it is to put an end to Rikers, even with the City's recent success in dramatically reducing crime and the number of pretrial detainees.

In the 1970's and 80's the City sought to shut down Rikers for the same reasons that exist today. Now, we have a chance to close Rikers once and for all. I appreciate that the Council might have concerns regarding the unique approach for designing and building the new jails. This is not a typical Special Permit for a building with drawings and design parameters attached. The individual jails will benefit from oversight regarding cost and schedule, as well as neighborhood context and architectural quality at the four locations. Strategies are being developed by women and men of good will to ensure vigorous community engagement as design progresses for each site.

Without the Council's approval we will lose the opportunity to rectify what Rikers has become – an egregious injustice itself, undermining our great City.

It's now or never!