

December 29, 1984

A FEW RESPONSIBILITIES LESS IS ALL THE BOARD OF ESTIMATES NEEDS

To the Editor:

There is no need to enlarge the New York City Board of Estimate ("Bellamy Calling for Expanding Estimate Board," Dec. 4). A more reasonable solution, in light of litigation that seeks to abolish or alter the board's structure, would be to shift its budgetary powers to the City Council. All nonroutine contracts, zoning and franchise matters should be shifted, too.

Such a shift would abolish the board's legislative powers, and the "one person, one vote" principle, which is applicable to legislative bodies, would no longer apply. An examination of alternatives helps support the case for this solution.

If a weighted system of voting is introduced, instead of the 6-to-5 split between citywide and borough officials, the city officials would count for three times the total of the borough presidents. The bolstered citywide presence would so overwhelm the borough delegations that population inequalities among the boroughs would not even roughly translate into major disparities.

Any two citywide officials could dominate the business of the board, with assistance from any one borough representative. Under the board's present scheme, any two citywide officials would require at least two borough president votes for control.

Federal District Court in Brooklyn, in a decision by Judge Edward R. Neaher, found that this form of weighted voting muted the discrepancies among the boroughs. However, Staten Island residents now speak of seeking to secede from the city rather than accept a weighted voting system. Richard Emery, a New York Civil Liberties Union attorney, who represents the plaintiffs in the Board of Estimate cases, originally proposed a plan, apparently similar to Miss Bellamy's recent proposal, that would scrap the unevenly populated boroughs as districts and base new districts on the population of Staten Island (Op-Ed, Sept. 15). Mr. Emery proposed dividing the city into 19 districts, each with a population of about 360,000. Brooklyn would have 6 districts; Queens, 5; Manhattan, 4; the Bronx, 3, and Staten Island, 1. The citywide officials would maintain their present dominance by commanding 7 votes each, 21 in all, as compared with 19 for the district representatives. Mr. Emery suggested that fairly drawn districts would not be a disaster for Staten Island because that district could form alliances across borough borders with other middle-class areas, thereby protecting local interests.

Such an upper-house approach of 22 members for city government, Mr. Emery believes, is small enough to operate efficiently but large enough to eliminate the backroom politics of the present board. It is doubtful that New Yorkers would want a solution that means adding 14 more politicians, and any solution would have to pass by referendum.

In this light, the shifting of the board's budget powers to the City Council, with whom the board currently shares budget powers, as well as the shifting of nonroutine contracts, and zoning and franchise matters, would be a more workable alternative.

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Hollis, N.Y., Dec. 6, 1984.

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