

September 2020

To the United Federation of Teachers,

We are writing to you as student leaders from the [MinKwon Center](#)'s Youth Empowerment Program, and we hope to gain your support in advocating against the Flushing Waterfront Rezoning. At the MinKwon Center for Community Action, we work with Asian American and immigrant communities to achieve economic and social justice for all. We believe that as youth, we have the power to rally against injustice and make change in our community. With the help of the UFT, we can make our goal of shutting down the rezoning a reality.

Recently, there has been a [proposal to develop 1,700 luxury condominiums and hotel units in the Downtown Flushing waterfront area](#). Of these 1,700 units, less than 90 are promised to be "affordable." A family of four has to make at least \$85,000 a year to even apply for the "affordable" housing, when District 7 residents make a [per capita income of \\$28,541](#). As youth who consider Flushing to be our home, we fear that the proposed development would displace immigrant and low-income families. We ask that as an organization of teachers and mentors who we look up to daily, the United Federation of Teachers will consider providing our campaign with the support it needs.

Snapshot of the Issue:

- [1 in 4 Flushing residents lives below the federal poverty line](#), and [Asian Americans in NYC have the highest rate of poverty](#).
- [40.8% of Flushing residents are rent burdened](#), meaning they spend over 50% of their salary on rent
- Within the past academic year, [114,000 public school students were reported as homeless](#), making that 1 out of every 10 students in the city.
- Francis Lewis High School, the school where many Flushing students attend, reports that it is far beyond its 2300 student capacity, currently at approximately 4500 students.
- A study by the Maryland State Department of Education has shown that [schools with larger amounts of students exhibit higher suicide rates](#), likely due to limited resources and lack of individual student attention.

Family Concerns

The rezoning of the waterfront to build luxury condos could increase the already staggering rent prices of the surrounding buildings and speed up the already ongoing gentrification and displacement in Flushing. For rent-burdened families, the coronavirus pandemic and the xenophobia around Asian businesses has also worsened the situation by causing them to lose their sources of income. If the rezoning was to become a reality, it would be the final blow that kicks longtime Flushing residents out of their homes.

Some lower-income families already see their children as a source of income and expect them to work in order to help pay rent. In many cases, younger children are forced to be the head of the household, especially in households with divorced parents or parents with limited English proficiency. These kids would be immersed in tasks — helping parents with the bills, looking after siblings, doing household chores, just to name a few — all with the added stress of pursuing an education, making time for extracurriculars, and just simply being children.

Student Concerns

The adverse effects of this rezoning not only negatively impacts children from low-income families, but indirectly hurts all students attending Flushing schools. Overcrowding is one of the major issues already plaguing local schools in the region, so constructing a high rise building to further increase Flushing's population is plainly irrational. Francis Lewis High School was recently forced to build an annex to its school because it reached numbers far beyond the student capacity. If more students arrive as a result of condos being built, it would not only pose a safety hazard but also be detrimental to students' education. Overpopulated schools may not have all the resources and supplies needed for all students, transferring much of the burden onto families who may lack the funds. How can students be expected to receive a proper education when the school is just unable to accommodate them? To make matters worse, these overcrowded schools may lack sufficient counselors and wellness departments to address student mental health concerns, leaving many of their issues to go unaddressed. Mental health is often one of the most overlooked aspects in students' lives, which explains the increased suicide rate in larger schools. During a Community Board 7 hearing on the rezoning, CB7 board member John Choe testified that students from JHS 189 were reporting feelings of depression because of threats of eviction or their fear of being displaced from their homes.

Teacher Concerns

In addition to students who are unable to focus in class due to personal/ home problems, teachers will face greater pressures to be both educators and social workers. The elevated student to teacher ratio as a result of the rezoning will prevent teachers from focusing on students' individual needs and will overwork teachers. Teachers' wages in the United States are exceptionally low for the amount of hours and work they commit to their students and school. With a shortage of supplies and inadequate resources, some teachers may feel pressured to fund classroom materials for their students themselves, which is unreasonable considering teachers are already underpaid workers. Most teachers will feel overwhelmed by the need to compromise or cut back on their students' education based on the lack of available learning materials. Students will be kept from the full educational experience, and teachers will be burdened with the weight of wanting to, but not being able to, do more for their students.

Why the support of the UFT is important to us:

As part of an anti-rezoning campaign with the MinKwon Center, we engaged the local community through door knocking efforts and public education. We spoke and gathered support from faith groups, tenants, and small business leaders, and organized throughout the ULURP process [to testify at the Community Board 7 hearings](#) and Queens Borough President Hearing. The Minkwon Center has made significant progress in advocating against the developments, which includes [shutting down a larger scale rezoning effort in 2016 by the same developers](#). Most recently, our activism and testimonies encouraged the [Queens Borough President Sharon Lee to vote no on the rezoning](#).

We believe that with the support of the Teacher's Union, this rezoning can be prevented. The UFT has historically supported minorities to ensure EVERY student is granted equal access to education through passing resolutions to translate state exams into other languages and to speak out against hate speech and hate crimes within the schooling system. The UFT has advocated for the right to appropriate class sizes, and the rezoning's impact threatens this right. Flushing is composed of many talented and bright-minded students with great potential to succeed and this rezoning will disrupt their future aspirations and goals. Every teacher understands the many burdens and heavy tolls that come with increasing prices, whether it be in rent, food, utilities, etc. We are asking for your support in our fight against the Flushing West Waterfront Rezoning, and would be endlessly grateful if you helped us spread the word about the issue and our campaign. Aside from raising awareness, teachers can submit testimonies against the rezoning to the City Planning Commission's Public Comment section (*link attached below letter) and help with future phone banking to reach Flushing tenants and youth. We also welcome any other individuals/groups you can refer to us that would be willing to support this campaign. Please join in fighting for our family's rights to remain in their homes.

Thank you for your time and please stay safe,
Youth Leaders from the Minkwon Center

***Link to submit testimonies:**

https://a002-irm.nyc.gov/EventRegistration/RegForm.aspx?eventGuid=fa206f3d-6400-4a95-8b39-87b1bfa975ef&fbclid=IwAR2UYcZ5shGFzs1HrkdGyx821_aYZzzS45DkywvfA507zOtnLdER86TP8o