

# BEN WETZLER

FOR CITY COUNCIL DISTRICT 4

## Housing That We Can Afford

Homes provide a space for families to grow, children to thrive, seniors to retire, and new small businesses to start. But unsustainable increases in housing costs have put homeownership out of reach for families and threatened the stability of long-time neighborhood residents. For the last eight years I have worked in housing policy for the State of New York, developing innovative strategies to keep our homes affordable and accessible to all New Yorkers. **I understand the nature of the problem, I know that solving it is critical to the future of our community, and if elected, I will lead bold initiatives to build and expand affordable housing here on the East Side and across the city.**

### 1. Reducing Costs for Tenants and Homeowners

**I am the only rent-stabilized tenant running for Council in District 4, and I believe that it is not just in my interests, but also my responsibility, to advocate for every tenant to have legal protections that will keep them in their homes.** If elected, I will work with tenant organizations around the district to guarantee that all renters have the resources they need to enforce their rights and I will work to address rising operating expenses so that owners can maintain their buildings without letting them fall into disrepair.

### Strengthening Rent Stabilization Through Proactive Enforcement

Legal rights are worth very little if the proper authorities allow abuses to go unaddressed, and the government's passive or reactive approach to violations and overcharges is unsustainable. **If elected, I will work with the relevant authorities at the State and City level, and the Attorney General's office, to end the complaint-driven framework that has characterized enforcement of tenant protection laws.** We must take a data-driven approach to enforcement, looking at trends in rental markets and landlords' reported incomes to assess when violations are likely to occur and proactively reach out to at-risk tenants. This would improve compliance and take the burden off of tenants, and I am committed to seeing it happen.

### Bringing Down Insurance Costs through Risk Sharing

In recent years, insurance costs for building owners have increased to levels that make them unaffordable to homeowners, and many condos and co-ops have seen their carrying charges spike. **The City should create a mechanism whereby building owners who can demonstrate sound finances and good property management can form low-cost risk pools and obtain lower rates from insurers.** It will be important to establish high and consistent standards for entry, so that responsible owners are not forced to take on the risks of poorly maintained properties, and if elected I will pursue this on the Council.

# BEN WETZLER

FOR CITY COUNCIL DISTRICT 4

## Helping Homeowners Comply with Energy Efficiency Goals

Local Law 97 mandated significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions in buildings above 50,000 square feet with stiff penalties for non-compliance starting in 2025. Many condo and co-op associations have not had an opportunity to come into compliance. In the years since the mandates were enacted, interest rates and costs have spiked that make them unaffordable to homeowners. **The City and State must work together to create a reasonable path to compliance for owners, so that homeowners are not forced to choose between affordability and the environment, and must provide relief for those that make a good faith effort to comply.** For example, there is a property tax abatement but it caps the value of apartments that can benefit. Many co-op and condo buildings on the East Side will be ineligible for relief. If elected, I will work to **expand eligibility for these abatements** and develop new, low-cost financing options to help homeowners come into compliance.

## Improving SCRIE and DRIE

The Senior Citizen and Disability Rent Increase Exemptions (SCRIE and DRIE) help both building owners and tenants on fixed incomes by protecting them from large rent increases and providing replacement income to their landlord. However, the application process is burdensome, and the \$50,000 income eligibility cap has not been adjusted in over a decade. **Given the significant inflation the country experienced in the last few years, many seniors, even retirees, are approaching that cap and at risk of losing this crucial benefit.** If elected, I will work with the State Legislature and the relevant City agencies to simplify the application process and proactively reach out to eligible tenants to ensure they are not leaving money on the table. Additionally, I will champion an amendment to State law adjusting the income cap upwards and updating it annually to match inflation and Social Security COLAs.

## 2. An Ambitious Plan for New Housing

For New York to be the welcoming and thriving metropolis it was meant to be, we must confront the historic shortage of available housing head on and increase the rate at which homes are built. **Economists estimate that New York City must construct more than half a million new homes across the five boroughs in the next decade.** To meet this challenge, we will have to rethink our approach to city planning. We must create comprehensive city- and neighborhood-level plans that pair new construction with necessary infrastructure, school facilities, traffic management, and protections for open space and historic cultural resources. **A comprehensive approach will be a significant improvement over the current practice of ad-hoc changes to land use regulations on specific sites at the request of real estate developers.**

## Long Term Growth Plans That Preserve Open Space and Affordability

We saw a preview of what could be possible this past year, when the City Council adopted its first citywide growth plan in decades (called "City of Yes"). Community Board 6, which represents much of Council District 4, supported the plan but noted that the current rules

# BEN WETZLER

FOR CITY COUNCIL DISTRICT 4

allow for playgrounds and open space in Stuyvesant-Town, where I live, to be developed into new towers. Through the work of local tenant leaders and the Community Board, the plan was amended to prevent recreational space from being built over. These new protections would not have been possible if the Council had waited until building plans had already been filed, but as part of a citywide growth plan, open space precious to our community was preserved. **By developing a comprehensive plan for the neighborhood, we can employ strategies like these to identify and add housing in ways that respect our existing built environment and historic neighborhoods.**

## Homeownership for the Middle Class

Every New Yorker who has worked hard and saved should be able to own a home that fits the needs of their family, and should be able to afford to stay there for the rest of their life. **Putting homeownership within reach will require lowering the cost of housing, and I believe that ordinary New Yorkers shouldn't have to compete with institutional investors to buy a home.** If elected, I will support legislation to rein in corporate landlords buying up the inventory of available homes and create new co-op apartments for middle-class families on City-owned land through a renewed Mitchell-Lama program for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## Mitchell-Lama 2.0

In the mid-twentieth century, New York took ambitious action to create new, limited profit housing for the middle class on underused land through the Mitchell-Lama program. These buildings have endured as some of NYC's most vibrant affordable communities. **As we confront the challenge of creating homeownership opportunities for the next generation of New Yorkers, we should look to these past successes as a model.** If elected, I will begin a comprehensive survey of City-owned land—parking garages, unused offices, municipal storage—across Manhattan that could be converted or redeveloped as housing for the middle class. These new buildings, like the original Mitchell-Lamas, would be self-sustaining, not dependent on ongoing public subsidy, but with limited profits that ensure they remain affordable to the families that live there.

## Building Code Reforms for Midrise Apartment Buildings

Much of the housing stock on the East Side is in older midrise buildings—buildings that are eight to ten stories, generally with an elevator, with floor plans that allow for lots of natural light and family-friendly interior space. In the late 1960s, the building code requirements were changed and **this change had the unintended effect of making buildings taller and skinnier, less fire-safe, and providing less natural light and space for families and older tenants with mobility needs.** The building code should be amended to bring back the more traditional pre-war midrise design for buildings under nine stories, and should incorporate modern features such as soundproofing, energy efficiency standards, fire-safe materials, and accessibility.

# BEN WETZLER

FOR CITY COUNCIL DISTRICT 4

## A New Midtown Plan: Converting Office Space into Homes

Midtown Manhattan is the center of the world, but it has undergone rapid changes in response to COVID, a new economy, and the housing crisis. We must get ahead of these trends with a proactive, community-driven plan to transform Midtown into a true mixed-use, “24/7” neighborhood by repurposing the existing commercial building stock and investing in new housing, schools, and public green space. Post-COVID-19, office values have plummeted and there has been reduced foot traffic to local businesses—particularly at night, making the neighborhood less safe. **Adapting and reusing this space would preserve the value of the existing property without the need for disruptive teardowns and bottom-up new construction.** I have unique insight into how to make this work efficient and cost effective and keep the resulting apartments affordable, including creatively adapting office layouts into residential space. **If elected, I will work with property owners and architects to facilitate these conversions, including finding compatible uses for interior space that does not get enough light and air to accommodate homes.**

## 3. Improving Tenant Protections

### Strengthen Right to Counsel Laws

Protecting tenants means guaranteeing that they are never forced into housing court without legal representation. As an East Side Democratic Party leader, I supported the original Right to Counsel law when it passed in 2017. Since then, due to the backlog of cases that built up during the COVID pandemic, the courts have been stretched thin and 17,000 tenants, two thirds of all tenants in housing court, have had to appear without an attorney. **If elected, I will work to increase the number of attorneys representing tenants in housing court, so that nobody faces the threat of losing their home without proper representation.**

### Enforcement Against Negligent Landlords

This past December, the State Attorney General settled a major lawsuit against Lilmor Management—one of the city’s “worst landlords” according to the NYC Public Advocate—after they violated housing laws related to building maintenance and left 130 young children with lead poisoning. While the \$6.5 million settlement is a record for a suit of this kind, it is small relative to the size of the company’s 49 building portfolio. **At a minimum, the penalties should be higher than the cost of repairs, or else there is no incentive to comply.** If elected I will work to ensure that steep penalties for these violations are written into the law, so that conditions in buildings are improved and negligent landlords are brought to justice.

### Tenant Protection Fund

The most effective fighters for tenants rights are the tenants themselves, but tenant associations and legal services organizations often operate with shoe-string budgets and volunteer staff, and City support is decentralized and inconsistent. **If elected, I will work to create**

# BEN WETZLER

FOR CITY COUNCIL DISTRICT 4

a dedicated source of funding and a “one-stop-shop” approach to providing resources that support the work of tenant advocates and community organizations. These grants are often small, but are critical to ensuring that advocates can remain vigilant, organized, and capable of fighting for their rights when the need arises.

## Reform the Rent Guidelines Board to Better Reflect Community Needs

It is undeniable that the mayor has too much power in setting rents. I support efforts at the State level to **make RGB members Council-confirmable**, so that local leaders can vet nominees and ensure that they will focus on tenants’ needs, not the mayor’s political future. Additionally, we must **overhaul the data-collection process that guides the RGB’s deliberations**. Much of the data the RGB uses is self-reported by landlords or compiled from tax documents that do not accurately line up with the true operating costs and revenues of buildings. This makes it impossible for the Board to accurately assess the needs of tenants and building owners alike, and risks putting the solvency of the stabilized housing stock in jeopardy. If elected, I will work with the relevant City and State agencies to provide the RGB with the most up-to-date and accurate information on the state of rent stabilized buildings and their tenants.

## 4. Making Homeless Assistance Work for the Most Vulnerable

Homelessness in New York City is at the highest level it has been since the Great Depression, driven by rents that have outpaced incomes and a failure of the City’s social services system to properly connect at-risk populations with support. **I believe that the most effective way to combat homelessness is to prevent it, by ensuring that working families stay out of housing court and New Yorkers with special needs can access care in a permanent, stable setting.**

## Changing the Shelter-First Mindset to Housing-First

Most New Yorkers experiencing homelessness do not have mental health or drug abuse problems; they are simply experiencing the worst possible manifestation of the same housing affordability crisis as everyone else and have nowhere else to go. Keeping working families in their homes and providing a sufficient supply of affordable housing for when they do have to move is key to keeping working families out of shelters and will free up resources for the social services system to address homelessness cases with the most severe needs. **If elected, I will advocate for funding for rental assistance vouchers to ensure that no New Yorker is driven out of their home by high rents and to supplement capital funding so that our new affordable housing is affordable at even the lowest income levels.**

## Streamlining the Supportive Housing Intake, Outreach, and Referral Process

For those experiencing homelessness with mental health issues, the failures of our behavioral health system have created an intolerable public safety threat, one that harms both

# BEN WETZLER

FOR CITY COUNCIL DISTRICT 4

the homeless population and the public at large. People struggling with mental health care needs are best served when they are in a stable housing situation with on-site supportive services. This type of housing requires coordination between social service departments, housing agencies, and health care providers, which has been lacking under the current mayoral administration. **If elected, I will work with the City's social service agencies and providers to improve coordination at every level—from outreach to assessment, referral, and placement—so that people experiencing homelessness are receiving the right kind of care in an appropriate setting without bureaucratic delays.**