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September 2, 2020

Commissioner Jonnel Doris
New York City Department of Small Business Services
One Liberty Plaza, 11th Floor
New York, NY 10006

Dear Commissioner Doris,

I write today on behalf of Astoria’s independently owned restaurants, one of the largest employers in my Council District, who face their coldest winter yet. They have been barely able to make ends meet throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and, with the prospect of no indoor dining in the months ahead, face pure financial ruin. It is on their behalf that I request you come to Astoria, meet with them, and find a solution to help them and their employees survive this unprecedented time.

The current response to this economic crisis has not met the moment. For months, in order to stop the spread of COVID-19, restaurants were relegated to only take-out or delivery service. This was a deadly blow to establishments that were packed to the gills before the pandemic. Citywide, some estimate as many as 300,000 service industry workers have been put out of work.¹ Our restaurants took it in stride, however, to do their part in flattening the curve. Then, as we recovered and the phased reopenings began, there was a small sigh of relief. Expanded outdoor dining has indeed helped cushion the financial blow, but, as we enter the sixth month of this pandemic, these restaurants have been left out to dry. They face an uncertain fall that will force them to lay off thousands more western Queens residents unless we enable indoor dining. Bear in mind these are waitstaff, bussers, dishwashers, and chefs, who unfortunately have the least amount of labor protections to begin with. If they lose their jobs, many of the existing government aid and social safety net programs won’t come to their rescue.

This is why indoor dining will be so crucial to their survival. Andrew Rigie of the New York City Hospitality Alliance recently noted this will bring reprieve to those “desperately trying

¹ <https://nypost.com/2020/08/31/ban-on-indoor-restaurant-dining-in-nyc-may-send-people-to-nj-cuomo/>

to hold on” as “many of them are just shutting permanently.”² While I understand Governor Cuomo and Mayor de Blasio’s concerns for holding off, there should at least be a plan in place for what indoor dining might look like. We have done the same for schools, gyms, and museums. We have also done the same for restaurants in all other parts of New York State. We should begin the work now, in partnership with restaurant owners who know what they need better than anyone, to figure out what’s needed for patrons to safely dine indoors at a reduced capacity.

These proprietors also still desperately need government resources to navigate through the new normal. As I wrote to you and your colleagues earlier this year, it was troubling most of the COVID-19 relief grants issued through SBS went to Manhattan small businesses.³ We here in western Queens are feeling the crush of that inaccessibility months later. There are many operating costs when running a small business, cancelling rent is not nearly enough when other costs like food, inventory, equipment, and staff are mounting. Agencies like SBS exist to guide these restaurateurs through the complicated maze of accessing grants, so they can instead focus on fulfilling their dreams. Though I realize getting cash in their hands largely depends on Congress sending New York City a stimulus package, my hope is you can hear from these owners, listen to their unique needs, and work with them and my office to find a solution.

As a fellow Queens resident, I’m sure you understand the value independently owned restaurants play in the borough’s essence. They tell the stories of where we, our parents, or our grandparents came from. A meal can open someone up to a level of understanding or appreciation for another culture. We cannot let that pass, for if we do, the very core of New York City will wither away. I look forward to working with you on finding a pathway forward for our restaurants.

Sincerely,



Costa Constantinides
Council Member, District 22

² <https://wcbs880.radio.com/articles/news/pressure-grows-for-nyc-to-resume-indoor-dining>

³ <https://www.nysenate.gov/newsroom/articles/2020/jessica-ramos/senator-jessica-ramos-council-member-costa-constantinides-call>