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Testimony to City Council Committee on Economic Development

On Behalf of: Community and Worker Ownership Project, CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies

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Thank you Chair Maloney and members of the committee for the opportunity to present testimony on the issue of Municipal Grocery Stores. As an organization that teaches and promotes cooperative economics as a means towards equity, affordability, community resilience and economic justice, we want to share our perspective of how the five municipally owned grocery stores could support these goals. Affordable food is a cornerstone of public health, economic stability, and community well-being. As New York City faces both current affordability pressures and certain future crises, it is imperative that we invest in durable, community-centered food infrastructure.

The proposal for five municipal grocery stores is a strong start, but it is not enough. We should view these initial stores as priming the pump—a foundation we can immediately build upon. This initiative should expand to include a broader ecosystem: at least 20 cooperatively rooted stores distributed across communities, alongside buying clubs, local vendors, and decentralized distribution networks, building out a network of food provisioning with resilient infrastructure.

With the Mayor's call for affordability, the establishment of an Office of Mass Engagement and the leadership of a Deputy Mayor for Economic Justice, now is the time to advance a bold agenda—one that addresses both immediate needs and long-term resilience for future generations. We can frame this not just as a grocery store program, but as a vital component of a comprehensive strategy for food provisioning, supporting a larger infrastructure strategy. If we are serious about solving food access in both the short and long term, we must invest in systems—not just sites.

To succeed, this effort must be surrounded by thoughtful policy and cross-agency collaboration. We should align food access initiatives with other public priorities, leveraging shared impact and reducing costs through coordination. When infrastructure serves multiple purposes, it becomes more efficient and more powerful.

We already have critical assets in place that can be integrated into this vision:

- Local commercial kitchens and workforce training centers
- Street vendors, with new regulatory improvements
- Deliveristas, whose organizing power can strengthen distribution systems
- Worker cooperatives as small, community-based businesses
- Sustainable supply chains and alternative distribution routes, including our Blue Highways
- Community gardens, mutual aid networks, and food pantries that are already bringing community together and feeding people

Many of these models already practice shared governance and deep community engagement. These are essential elements for long-term economic justice and community care. This is our moment for innovation.

We should move forward with the five stores—but with a clear, bold plan to expand. We can use this opportunity to support a demonstration model of an ideal infrastructure: one that is crisis-ready, locally rooted, and capable of scaling. This includes building in democracy, transparency, and real mechanisms for community and worker power—through worker ownership, community governance, and broad public engagement. We can pilot a concentrated, community-rooted model—for example, in

Central Brooklyn—that connects municipal investment with local assets that are already in play.

At an estimated \$14 million per store, this investment signals the scale of ambition required. But it must be framed as part of a larger development plan—not an isolated effort. Especially in the context of budget constraints and increased scrutiny on public spending, this initiative will require sustained commitment, collaboration and strategic clarity.

We cannot let a bold, long-term vision stand in the way of immediate action—but neither can we afford to act without that vision. We must do both: build now, and build toward something bigger.

This is about more than grocery stores. It is about creating the infrastructure for food distribution and provisioning that ensures dignity, access, and resilience for all.