Written Testimony for Public Record
Submitted by: Steven Kolb, CEO, Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA)
Re: Midtown South Mixed-Use Rezoning (MSMX)
May 5, 2025

To the members of the New York City Planning Commission:

I submit this testimony on behalf of the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA), representing nearly 400 American fashion designers—many of whom live, work, and manufacture in New York City.

We acknowledge the need for thoughtful, forward-looking change in Midtown South. The neighborhood must evolve to meet housing and economic demands, and CFDA supports responsible development. But that change should not come at the expense of New York's fashion industry, which has long been an anchor of creativity, jobs, and cultural relevance for this city.

The MSMX proposal as currently written does not go far enough to protect the fashion economy that helped shape this neighborhood. Independent designers, manufacturers, and creative workers face rising costs, shrinking space, and increasing pressure from speculative development. Without enforceable mechanisms to preserve affordable workspace and protect small businesses, this plan risks repeating past mistakes.

When the Garment District was rezoned in 2018, the City made several commitments to support the fashion and manufacturing sectors. Many of those commitments have not been realized:

- Neighborhood BID Funds: Landlords pledged $2.5 million per year (totaling $25 million) to support the industry. While some money was distributed, the bulk never materialized. These funds should be accounted for, and if landlords will not release them, they should be redirected and administered by a more accountable organization. A new pledge to extend the support should also be given with additional funds earmarked.
- $20 Million for a Building: The City allocated $20 million to establish a centralized garment production space, and applications were solicited from operators. When no viable partners emerged due to the small investment from the City, the funds should have been redirected elsewhere—but they were not.
- Tax Break for Landlords: A tax incentive was created for landlords who retained garment tenants. No landlords opted in—likely because the program wasn't actively marketed or communicated and/or the program did not provide enough incentives to participate.
- FMI Program Suspension: During the pandemic, the city suspended the Fashion Manufacturing Initiative (FMI). CFDA had proposed a strong, ready-to-implement idea—the Local Production Fund—to support small brands working with NYC factories. The City never reinstated the program, with a majority of the funding never provided.

These examples show a pattern: big commitments made publicly, little follow-through, and minimal accountability.

We urge the Commission to delay or oppose the MSMX rezoning unless it includes clear, enforceable protections for the creative industries, transparency on public investment, and—most importantly—a serious evaluation of unfulfilled promises from the Garment District rezoning and an opportunity to provide additional ideas that support the District's businesses.

Fashion is not a nostalgic industry clinging to old infrastructure—it is a vital part of New York's future economy.

We want to see Midtown South thrive, but that future must include the designers, makers, and small businesses who continue to define the city's creative edge.

Sincerely,

Steven Kolb
Chief Executive Officer
Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA)