**New York City Council Committee on Technology**

**Hearing on Open Data**

**September 21, 2016**

Jessie Braden, Director of Pratt Institute’s Spatial Analysis and Visualization Initiative (SAVI) respectfully submits the following testimony for the Hearing on Open Data (September 21, 2016) to Chairman Vacca and the Councilmembers of the Committee on Technology.

Pratt SAVI, launched in 2013, is a Geographic Information Systems (GIS)-based research lab and service center that focuses on mapping, data analysis, and visual storytelling. SAVI supports students and faculty at Pratt as well as community-based organizations (CBOs) who don’t have the resources, skills or time to perform their own research.

Open Data is *the* central, critical piece of the work we do every day and we sincerely thank you for supporting Open Data and passing the seven amendments of the law. Without access to municipal data we could not effectively prepare students to make substantive, immediate contributions to their fields upon graduation (which often include working in city government). Our work with community-based organizations (CBOs) shows that Open Data is equally invaluable to their programmatic goals, especially when used in combination with their own on-the-ground collected data and rich qualitative knowledge.

It goes without saying that the seven amendments to the Open Data Law will increase the utility of the information for all users. Without proper documentation and standards, data can be indecipherable, misunderstood or misapplied. The seven amendments address many of these challenges but we feel there are four areas for improvement worth highlighting:

1. **Improve the user experience of the NYC Open Data website.** Most CBOs and students we work with find the Open Data website overwhelming and difficult to navigate. Many helpful pieces are often overlooked by lay users including data dictionaries/metadata and filtering options. Also, users are frequently confused by the volume of returns on keyword searches and data sets that are similar. We suggest placing data dictionaries/metadata and filtering options prominently on each data page, improving the quality of search results and working with user experience experts to refine the site interface. And, we strongly suggest partnering with user experience experts to make data dictionaries/metadata understandable to a variety of audiences.
2. **Provide resources to educate new Open Data users.** There is a wide range of user expertise and many may not understand the nature of data, its limitations and how to work with the information. Some resources that discuss the following could be helpful: why city data is created (operational purposes, not necessarily for public/civic research), basic data assessment approaches, basic data summary techniques, basic data analysis and summary statistics methods, and information about appropriate applications of specific datasets.
3. **Allow users make corrections that improve data quality.** New York City is fortunate to have many, many highly skilled and knowledgeable Open Data users who have extensive experience working with the information. We suggest a “two-way street” approach to data that allows users to improve municipal data. The New York City Department of Parks and Recreation has set an impressive precedent for this via their decennial tree census and have demonstrated the benefits of tapping into volunteer networks.
4. **Geocode all possible data sets prior to public release.** In additional to standardizing all addresses using DoITT’s Geoclient, we strongly feelthat any possible geocoding and spatial data creation should be done prior to data release or as part of the data export process. Most software and web mapping platforms now charge per address for geocoding and this can quickly become prohibitive for users. Additionally, many new data users struggle with the geocoding process and this will provide equal access to spatial data.

In conclusion, thank you for this important oversight hearing. We look forward to continued improvements regarding access, accuracy, education and usability of data for all. And, we thank you for your commitment to Open Data which allows us to better teach students, assist faculty research and to support CBOs working for a better New York City.

Thank you,

Jessie Braden on behalf of Pratt SAVI