



Reinvent Albany Testimony to the NYC Council Committee on Technology For 2021 Oversight Hearing on Open Data Compliance

December 10, 2021

Good morning Chairman Holden and members of the Committee on Technology. My name is Tom Speaker, and I am a Policy Analyst for Reinvent Albany. Reinvent Albany advocates for transparent and accountable government in New York State. We were instrumental in drafting and passing New York City's 2012 Open Data Law and subsequent amendments. Thank you for holding this oversight hearing today.

Thanks to the leadership of the City Council, New York City passed the world's first open data law, and our success and failures are closely watched by governments everywhere.

Today, in the last month of the eight-year de Blasio administration and on the cusp of a new mayor and City Council entering office, Reinvent Albany's testimony will highlight eight points.

First, it is essential that the City Council continue to hold this annual oversight hearing and look for ways to continuously improve the NYC open data program. The Council has actively worked to increase the transparency, accountability and effectiveness of the City's open data efforts by passing legislative mandates.

Second, the success of NYC government open data depends on public interest and pressure. NYC leaders and career management have not fully realized the operational and efficiency benefits that open data offers, and some actively hoard their public data and keep it from the public, other agencies or even their own agencies. Reporting mandates like the annual compliance plan, data dashboard and agency audits are essential to compel agencies to comply with the Open Data Law.

Third, having a Mayor's Office of Data Analytics is generally a good idea and especially important to the success of Open Data. Officials in the Mayor's office have clout and access to Deputy Mayors that the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DOITT) does not. We hope the Adams administration has a robust MODA.

Fourth, despite almost a decade of experience and a real investment of time and talent, NYC government has barely begun to reap the benefits of open data. By far the most expensive part of creating an agency dataset is gathering data. Once the dataset is created, publishing that data is cheap. And once the data is published, an infinite number of users can benefit from it. It is simply stunning to hear agencies complain about the time and effort needed to publish data in the Open Data Portal, since publishing data for broad use probably costs half a percent or less of what gathering and maintaining the data does. To use a paper analogy, it's like taxpayers paying an agency to create a phonebook of city services and then printing one copy and sticking it on a bookshelf in some manager's office.

Fifth, the mayoral transition between the Bloomberg and de Blasio administration almost destroyed NYC Open Data. MODA had to be rebuilt from scratch, DOITT was adrift, and many agencies defaulted to ignoring the requirements of the Open Data Law. We hope this Committee and City Council can help NYC government avoid this when Mayor Eric Adams takes over.

Sixth, MODA and DOITT are struggling to get agencies to fulfill basic aspects of the Open Data Law. According to the Open Data Dashboard, only 59% of datasets are updated on time and only a third of datasets scheduled for publication in the last 12 months have been available on time. Yes, COVID has been hard for everyone, but this performance is unacceptable and shows that almost a decade in, complying with the Open Data Law has not been institutionalized by agencies.

Seventh, we believe the key to sustainable open data is automating datasets so that agencies do not have to update data by hand. Our understanding is that DOITT has struggled to automate datasets. You should keep a close eye on dataset automation as it is the key to making open data cost-effective and sustainable.

Finally, you can think of open data as the canary in the coalmine of NYC government's information architecture. Agencies that are good at managing their data do not have much trouble publishing data to the Open Data Portal. That said, it is totally unclear to us whether high-level NYC managers and IT managers understand that a highly functioning open data system would save the city huge amounts of time and money and foster much more sophisticated and widespread data analytics. To this end, we suggest you and the Adams administration take a close look at DOITT's new nearly \$200 million contract that includes a redesign of DataBridge. This could be a huge opportunity to automate the flow of agency data to the public Open Data Portal. At a minimum, it is a great chance for MODA to rationalize NYC data management.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. I welcome any questions you may have.