Testimony of Reinvent Albany
Assembly Standing Committee on Governmental Operations
Assembly Standing Committee on Oversight, Analysis and Investigation
Legislative Commission on Government Administration
Albany, New York
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Good morning, I am John Kaehny, executive director of Reinvent Albany. We are a non-profit group with a strong interest in using Information Technology to help make New York State government more transparent, accountable and effective.

We are happy to see this hearing take place. Thank you committee chairs --- assembly members Englebright, Hevesi, and Latimore --- for raising these important and timely questions.

Accompanying my testimony is our March 2012 report, A **New Transparency for New York State**, which we released in March with Citizens Union, Common Cause NY, League of Women Voters of NY State and NYPIRG. That report lays out three dozen inexpensive recommendations for using technology to improve transparency and government efficiency in the executive and legislative branches, and with the attorney general and comptroller.

Before getting to the big questions posed in the hearing notice, here are two broad ideas and ten basic steps that would help New York State government harness the Information Revolution.

The first broad idea is that the most successful technology initiatives "align" the interests of a government agency and the public. For instance, the best government websites are the ones used by government and the public. Both groups demand continuous improvement from the site. (Yes, websites are the basic information platform for the foreseeable future.) Another example of "alignment" is New York City's Bus time, bus tracker. Bus riders and bus managers can see where all the buses on a given route are, but managers can access an extra layer of information.

The second broad idea is that harnessing government Information Technology is an essential, and inexpensive, economic development strategy. "Egovernment" practices like online transactions, permitting and information, make it easy to do business here. Putting government data online, and making it easy to find and use encourages innovation.

Ten Recommendations
These recommendations draw from practices already in use at least two other states and cities. Most can be done incrementally and at very low cost. They really call for a change of heart and willingness to try new things.

1. Put all digital information subject to FOIL online in an easy to find and use format on agency sites. No more locked, unsearchable, pdf files. All "FOILable" digital information that isn't personal should be available as a downloadable text or spreadsheet/CSV file depending on what it contains. Start with the most FOILed and otherwise information and go from there. Where possible, agencies should use an API layer, computer code that allows immediate streaming data from a website. The MTA has had huge success doing this with bus and subway trip data. There are dozens of state air, soil, water, road, bridge and public health data sets that should be made available this way.

2. Pass an open data law like New York's Local Law 11 which passed this spring with the strong support of the technology industry, the city's information agency and transparency advocates. If the governor is opposed to a legislative mandate, he can issue an executive order to the same effect. Either way, open data software platforms like Ckan and Socrata are inexpensive, and can make huge amounts of government data usable, very quickly.

3. Put all transactions completely online using web forms. Taxes, permits, fees, registration, charitable filings and annual forms, it should all be completely done online. This will save the state millions in processing costs, increase compliance, reduce errors, improve enforcement and reduce the cost of doing business in New York State. The Department of Tax and Finance is charging extra for paper income tax returns. Great idea. This is a win-win for the public and state government. Clerks that are laboring over mounds of paper can turn to ensuring that state rules and regulations are being followed --- which in many areas,

including Charitable organization compliance, they aren't. (Hint --- this would be a great hearing for the Investigations Committee.)

4. Map everything. The State Liquor Authority recently posted an online map of all liquor licenses. A viewer can scroll around and zoom in and get info on every licensee and their violations. This map is a good idea, and the information is of great interest to the public. That map, plus a downloadable database, mobile version and what's called an API, a tool that allows developers to directly access data, could be built for about $15,000 using open source software. (SLA paid more, but still a good project.) This is also a good an example of "alignment" since local police and SLA enforcement are also using the map.

5. Put Freedom of Information requests and responses completely online, and use FOIL requests to help determine what state digital information is put online first. The Port Authority is now putting all FOIL responses online, so everyone can see every response. (This idea is marred by the PA making the responses really hard to find and search, but let's take the good part.)

6. Create and empower a technology czar to coordinate the state's technology policy citizen centered initiatives, spread best practices, align public and intra-governmental technology efforts, promote open data efforts, collaborate with other levels of government and seek to fully exploit Information Technology for the public benefit. NY needs a center of gravity for IT thinking and innovation.

7. Eliminate barriers to tax payer paid for state digital information by eliminating fees for all but the largest information users. State digital information is a form of public wealth that can help foster innovation, and gets more valuable the more people that use it. The MTA was right to give away bus and subway travel data for free so as to encourage software developers to create apps. Likewise, the state should think of free data as an economic development strategy.

8. Buy open source software and join collaborative efforts with other states, the federal government and cities and towns, especially New York City. The current software purchase and licensing model is unaffordable and obsolete. NYS should be seeking to participate in the creation of civic software, as it is with the IRS' online charitable filing system. Online, shared, FOIL management software is an obvious place to begin since small towns and counties could use the same system, as could NYC.

9. Make informed decisions about IT. The state should aggressively gather, analyze and publicize information about state information usage. The state should use website analytics, phone and FOIL requests to create a picture of who is asking for what information. The CIOOFT did a great 2009 survey of state agency ecommerce and social media use. That should be an annual report, and should be expanded to include information about what information the public most frequently requests and FOIL's. The state makes big strategic decisions about IT organization and contracting money based on scanty internal research.

10. Use Content Management Systems like Drupal or Wordpress for all state websites. Once these sites are set-up, non-technical staff can update pictures, blog posts or other content. This frees up state technologists to work on more pressing problems and ensures more timely and useful content for the public.

Today's hearing asks two big questions. First, what are the implications of the Information Revolution for state government? Second, how can Information Technology be used by New York State government to create jobs and serve the public more efficiently and more responsively.

We are much closer to the beginning than to the end of the Information Revolution, but some trends are clear. Information Technology is increasingly centered on the citizen, or consumer. An agency's website is by far its most important public communication tool, transaction center and service center. Businesses already figured out that IT doesn't mean guys in the basement with mainframes. It means public information officers working with service providers, policy makers and regulators as teams to move agency activities online, and closer to the public. Successful businesses provide customers with numerous ways of contacting them online, including chats, comment and response boxes, secure emails and more. Successful governments need to do the same.

Mobile devices are literally putting power in the hands of the people. 2012 will be the year that 50% of American adults will have a smart phone, and ownership is skyrocketing across all demographics. Along with mobile computing comes the expectation that everything can be done online; including finding information, maps and transactions, be they movie or train tickets or state fishing permits --- and everything should be done online, because it's cheaper, faster, and more reliable.

Digital information is beginning to be understood as a form of wealth. Federal and academic economists are trying to determine if data and government data can actually

be calculated as part of Gross Domestic Product. How does NYS government best use its wealth of digital information for the public benefit?

The pace of already rapid technological change is accelerating. Hardware computing power and storage capacity doubles roughly every 18 months to two years. But super fast speeds combined with different types of social networks, and new data visualization techniques and maps are creating totally new information systems. How does the state government keep pace?

Rapid changes creates leaders and laggards in State Government, and creates the potential for massive waste as agencies lock themselves into buying services, software or hardware that becomes obsolete very quickly. Who in state government is responsible for spreading the things that work from one agency to another, be that smart contracting, an online FOIL processing system or a way of doing email notifications? Does the state take advantage of the best talent New York has to offer by aggressively recruiting new technology vendors, especially small businesses?

Parts of state government are doing good things with technology. DOH's METRIX, public health data program has an excellent mission statement. The Tax Department's online returns are a good idea; the DEP has enormous amounts of information on its site. There are many pockets of progress, especially if you include the Comptroller's and Attorney General's accountability sites. But the overall picture is one of a state government that still doesn't share digital information very well, is not very responsive to public demands, and doesn't seem to use its own websites or social media.

More so, New York State government does not seem to recognize that the Information Revolution that is underway is about IT used by the public, not internally. Of course we need strong internal IT systems to process and store ever increasing amounts of data. But those internal systems are there to support the public facing systems that provide the public with the online services and information that our state government is charged with providing. The good news is that New York can do a great deal, quickly and inexpensively to better harness the Information Revolution.