



Testimony to the Committee on Rules of the New York City Council

Regarding the Use of Technology to Make City Council More Responsive, Transparent, and Effective

February 24, 2014

Good Afternoon, and thank you Chairman Lander and Councilmember Kallos for holding this timely hearing, and for convening this panel. My name is John Kaehny, and I am testifying today on behalf of Reinvent Albany, where I am executive director, and also co-chair the NYC Transparency Working Group.

The question posed to our panel is how to use technology to help make City Council more responsive, transparent, and effective. Councilmember Kallos and my colleagues on the panel have created a list of excellent recommendations that cover a wide range of the council's activities. I will focus on three basic points.

1. Recurring Reform Hearings

This hearing – which is a great thing – should be the first installment of a permanent, public effort by the Council to continuously improve itself. The model here is the NYC Campaign Finance Board which convenes public hearings and expert panels after every election cycle to assess its own performance and seek public input. This public self-assessment increases confidence in CFB, and ensures that the leadership there is exposed to both criticism and new opportunities.

Council can do even better by conducting these “reform” hearings annually, and by accompanying the hearings with a timely report summarizing the recommendations, criticism, and next steps. In other words: these hundred things were recommended, and this year council will do the following ten of them.

2. Mobile Working Group

The Council Speaker and central staff should convene a working group on Mobile and Text First technology which includes interested members and their staff. Within a few months the group should issue specific recommendations for tools



that council can use to better communicate, engage and inform via mobile and two-way text message. Today's digital divide is more about the devices New Yorkers use to access the Internet than it is about access to broadband at home.

Public surveys overwhelmingly reveal that most working class, low income, and young people use a smartphone to access the Internet. Some use a feature phone equipped for texting. (In other words, the overwhelming majority of New Yorkers don't connect to the Internet via a computer.) So, the question for council is how it should be communicating with, and providing information to this great majority of New Yorkers in the mobile age?

3. Public Technology Plan

The council and central staff should adopt a public technology plan, put it online, and keep it updated. Simply put, the council should explain to members, staff, and the public what it is doing, what it plans to do, and some of the thinking behind its technology initiatives. This is especially important if council is adopting a raft of new tech tools and initiatives. Currently the public, and many members, have no idea what the plan is, and what new tools they can expect to see. This is a simple matter of accountability both to the public and to members.

The pace of technological change is accelerating with every passing day. So, rather than recommend specific tools, we recommend some processes for harnessing that change in manageable way.

Thank you.