

To: New York City Council - Committee on Government Operation
From: Noel Hidalgo, BetaNYC's Executive Director
Re: Oversight - Community Boards and Appointments



Tuesday, February 28th 2023

Good morning Chair and Committee Members,

Thank you for creating an option for us to participate remotely. We believe that remote communication tools are fundamentals for the Government in the digital age. Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, Community Boards and Borough Presidents turned to BetaNYC to learn how to do remote meetings. In partnership with Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer, BetaNYC stood up a centralized online meeting solution and was conducting virtual meeting trainings before DOITT even selected a platform.¹ Within a few weeks of the pandemic, Manhattan Community Boards were conducting monthly meetings and sharing important pandemic related information long before DOITT's "official" solutions for Community Boards was rolled out. Once it was rolled out, several Boards turned to BetaNYC for alternative solutions.

For the past eight years, BetaNYC has worked out of the Manhattan Borough President's office. We have provided front line technical, analytical, and staffing support to Borough Presidents and Community Boards. We have outlined very clear needs and have developed prototypes to address these needs. Every year, we advocate for our community of 5,000+ members to join their local community board.

We come before you today with a deep understanding of how community boards and staff are underfunded, under resourced, and ill prepared to work into the 21st Century.

Introduction

BetaNYC is a public interest technology non-profit dedicated to helping New Yorkers access information and use technology. Our work equips New Yorkers with digital and data literacy while providing for an honest and inclusive government.

- We believe in a government for the people, by the people, for the digital age.
- We empower the public with tools, education, and data.
- We demystify government, technology, design, and data with the goal of improving access to services and information.

¹ <https://beta.nyc/products/virtual-meeting-support-for-community-boards/>

- We explore a world of possibilities by providing a safe space for individuals and government to collaborate and organize an open community for all to improve the city.

BetaNYC demystifies design, technology, and data to the point where anyone can use it, create it, and participate in the decision making process. We host a number of online platforms that provide the general public a mechanism to share ideas and data.

For the last ten years, we have helped NYC government agencies explore and adapt to new technologies. For the last eight, we have dedicated our efforts to modernize Community Boards. We have researched their needs and documented technology and data literacy gaps across the five boroughs.²³ We bridge these gaps via a service we call Research and Data Assistance Requests - RADAR for short. RADARs help provide in-depth technology and analytical services to borough presidents, council members, community boards, and community based organizations.⁴

In 2019, we sat in front of this committee and testified on the needs of Community Boards. Based on two years of interviews, we outlined gaps in information technology, data challenges, digital literacy, social media, websites, help desk support, and business information tools.⁵ Then, the COVID-19 pandemic hit and we were forced to layer on another set of digital literacy and process management issues.

We could spend two hours talking about Community Boards, their lack of diversity, ineffective representation of actual community needs, and lack of digital and data literacy, but I can't spend two hours talking about my own transit rich community board which bought an SUV.⁶ Nonetheless, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for Community Boards and their district offices to be restructured for the 21st century. Additionally, Borough Presidents need more resources to support Board operations.

For the next few mins, we want to talk about our research supporting Borough Presidents, District Offices, and Community Boards. We should first note, BetaNYC provides a custom built process to four of the five Borough Presidents. The four largest boroughs use a secure digital application process to take in applicants, screen, interview, share out for nominations from Council Members, and summarize demographics and spatial statistics. We have worked with the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities to ensure that the public facing web tools are accessible. While we do get compensated for our labor, we must discount our work because none of the Borough Presidents can pay the actual cost.

² BetaNYC's Civic Innovation Fellows Community Board Technology Needs Report 2018, Emily Goldman, Noel Hidalgo, and Lindsay Poirier. 2018. BetaNYC.

<https://beta.nyc/publications/betanycs-civic-innovation-fellows-community-board-technology-needs-report-2018/>

³ Data Design Challenges and Opportunities for NYC Community Boards. Lindsay Poirier, Noel Hidalgo, and Emily Goldman. 2018. <https://beta.nyc/publications/data-design-challenges-and-opportunities-for-nyc-community-boards/>

⁴ <https://beta.nyc/products/research-and-data-assistance-requests/>

⁵ <https://beta.nyc/2019/02/25/testimony-oversight-committee-on-governmental-operations-transparency/>

⁶ <https://www.thecity.nyc/brooklyn/2019/5/23/21211060/brooklyn-community-board-roils-over-26-000-suv-splurge>

Recommendations for Borough Presidents

- Resources to support digital government work
 - Each Borough President should receive a \$500,000 boost in funding to provide district offices and boards technical support, ensure that community board websites are kept up to date, virtual meetings are supported, ongoing training is conducted, and a small amount of money is available for external organizations to support boards and their district offices.
- Improving the appointment process
 - We want a unified baseline process for appointments. This process should be digital, accessible, and well resourced with staff time. The current Microsoft toolkit from OTI is inadequate for this process.
 - Standards regarding training of new members. Land Use, Open Data, Resolution Writing, Bias and Conflict of Interest, and Parliamentary Procedures.
 - While we respect each board's desire to have their own attendance tracking, it is not unified across the city. This has a significant impact on reappointments. NYC needs standardized attendance tracking across the City's 59 community boards.
 - The eight year term limits, which we think are too short, are going to significantly affect expertise, capacity, and community knowledge. We need clear guidelines and tools on how term limited board members can share their institutional and community knowledge across generations.
- Holding agencies accountable
 - Every Borough President has a huge opportunity to shape how agencies respond to community needs. It should go beyond having agency representatives attend Borough Service Cabinet. There should be a citywide practice where the Borough Statement of Needs, the Mayor's Management Report, and Borough Service Cabinet are connected via data driven reports.

Recommendations for Boards and District Offices

- Resources to support digital government work
 - With much respect to district office staff, many are not trained to deal with complexities of a digital first government. While the best have staffed up or taught themselves how to access new tools, district managers need to increase their data and technical literacy.
 - Many need to hire data and technology literate talent and have urban planners at the ready.
 - Each board and district offices should be able to apply for a \$150,000 - 200,000 renewable grant to support their digital and data literacy development.
- Holding agencies accountable

- District Service Cabinet - Need to hold agencies more accountable through the data agencies publish on the open data portal. There should be a citywide practice where District Statement of Needs, the Mayor's Management Report, and District Service Cabinet are connected via data driven reports.
- District statement of needs is broken.
 - Timelines need to be rethought and every community meeting should have a seamless workflow that integrates into the district statement of needs.
 - This is the greatest toolkit for participatory decision making and budgeting. We should be leaning into this process, not abandoning it.
- Technical support
 - Boards need help publishing their calendars on the City Record.
 - Every staff member should be well equipped and trained to run virtual meetings from the district office and their home. We continue to come across district staff who do not have appropriate equipment for digital era government operations.
 - Boards need support writing resolutions that link to process management tools. Let us STOP using PDFs for moving data around.
 - Every single board should move away from TeamSite and move to Wordpress.⁷ Every single board needs ongoing Website support and development. This is on top of the ONE technical support person driving around to each board.
 - They need custom application development and no one has resources for this.
- We currently provide the following tools and would love support to improve them.
 - BoardStat⁸ - An interactive tool that empowers community boards to discover issues and trends within NYC 311 data. BoardStat was designed with community boards and for community boards.
 - Boundaries Map⁹ - An interactive tool that empowers community boards to discover issues and trends within NYC 311 data. BoardStat was designed with community boards and for community boards.
 - SLAM (State Liquor Authority Map)¹⁰ - A platform that saves community boards time and resources by aggregating data they use to review liquor license applications and sidewalk cafe applications in an easily accessible and unified view.
 - AirTable Support & Community Board Database (CBDB)¹¹ - A database template built with Community Boards to track community issues, resolution, and attendance.

Thank you for giving us this opportunity to give our story.

⁷ <https://beta.nyc/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/2018-Reports-Executive-Summay.pdf>

⁸ <https://boardstat.beta.nyc/>

⁹ <https://boundaries.beta.nyc/>

¹⁰ <https://slam.beta.nyc/>

¹¹ <https://beta.nyc/products/cbdb/>