

To: Acting Public Advocate and Chair of the Technology Committee
From: Noel Hidalgo, Executive Director of BetaNYC
Re: Oversight - Commission on Public Information and Communication's Collaboration in Developing City Information Policies and Promoting Governmental Transparency



Tuesday, 12 February 2019

Dear Acting Public Advocate and New York City Council Speaker Johnson, Committee Chair Koo, and Technology Committee Members

It is an honor to have this opportunity to represent New York City's civic technology, design, and data community.

I am the Executive Director of BetaNYC, a member driven good government non-profit organization. *We are advocates for a City government that is for the people, by the people, and for the digital era.*

In 2009, a group of neighbors started meeting to discuss the future of municipal open data and technology because they were concerned about a lack of open data and expensive technology procurements.

Over the last ten years, our 5,100+ members have fought to improve people's lives through technology, data and design.¹ We have watched the past three Public Advocates appoint COPIC members, host one meeting per term, and walk out of the office with little accomplishment. We have watched every Public Advocate publish flowery press releases only for them to disappear like tears in rain.

In 2012, we joined with Council Member Gale A Brewer to support the City's open data law. COPIC's absence is why we fought for the City's open data law.

In 2014, we published a *People's Roadmap to a Digital New York City*². It outlined how our City could adopt modern, agile practices to meet pressing needs for a more efficient, participatory, and transparent government. Additionally, we proposed 34 ideas that resulted in the following transformative legislation:

- placing the City Record online and in a machine readable format,
- ensuring that our Charter and laws are owned by the people, not a corporation,
- strengthening the NYC's open data laws through seven interlocking pieces of legislation,
- Formalizing the City's Chief Analytics Officer and the Mayor's Office of Data Analytics into the charter.

¹ <https://www.meetup.com/betanydc/>

² <http://nycroadmap.us>

The *People's Roadmap* outlined ideas that required government partnership. And, for the past four years, we have worked successfully with the Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer, Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams, Mayor's Office of Data Analytics, Manhattan and Brooklyn Community Boards, CUNY Service Corps, the Fund for the City of New York, and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation to study and test how communication technologies and open data can equip the public to improve their decision making. We have published three reports and filed numerous data set enhancements with the goal of improving community decision making.

Here is a list of a few achievements we have made; we have created the nation's first FREE municipal open data bootcamp³ — suggestions on how community board could better use communication technologies, including their websites (which DOITT is working on)⁴ — we convinced DOITT to be a part of the district needs process — we've educated, mentored, and employed over 50 City University of New York undergraduates⁵ (one of our Alumni is now one of your aides) — we've built a suite of specialized open data tools⁶ — we've documented, in detail, how information flows through community board meetings and the data they need to improve decision making⁷ — we've taught over one thousand New Yorkers how to put NYC's open data to use — we've enriched a local community of open data professionals and advocates by hosting three annual citywide open data festivals, with the fourth co-hosted with MODA⁸ coming up on Saturday, 2 March.

We are New York City's biggest open data fan — we have partnered with NYC Parks, NYC 311, NYC Planning, the Mayor's Office of Data Analytics, and NYC BigApps to host numerous data jams and hackathons that explore and demystify the City's data.

We are working with Department of Education's Computer Science for All program, inspiring the next generation of tech-empowered citizens. Through five borough wide hackathons and a citywide hackathon, middle and high school students are seeing themselves within the fabric of this city and its data. These young leaders are using their computer science skills to express their voice and contribute to a better city.

This was done this because someone needed to be the shepherd.

With the unflinching support of Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer and Mayor's Office of Data Analytics, we have marshaled private funds and community engagement to outline improvements to the City's data and community technology infrastructure

³ <https://beta.nyc/products/nyc-opendata-classes/>

⁴ <https://beta.nyc/publications/betanycs-civic-innovation-fellows-community-board-technology-needs-report-2018/>

⁵ <https://beta.nyc/programs/civic-innovation-lab/>

⁶ <https://beta.nyc/products/>

⁷ <https://beta.nyc/publications/>

⁸ <https://schoolofdata.nyc>

In testimony to the 2018 Charter Revision Commission, BetaNYC believes that COPIC needs to be reconceived for the 21st Century.⁹

At its core, COPIC functions to address three fundamental issues:

- **Oversight of government using existing communication technologies**
- **Access to public government information and data**
- **Government adoption of new communication technologies**

At this time, we firmly believe that COPIC's mandate is being executed through the collection of open data laws and reporting requirements.¹⁰ Council Members and the Technology Committee Chair have been extremely supportive and responsive to oversight hearings and community requests. This being said, there is an explicit need for COPIC's oversight functions.

If there is ever a time for communication technology leadership, it is now.

We've had an acting Chief Technology Officer¹¹ for as long as we were missing a Chief Analytics Officer¹². We've spent the last year working with DOITT to modernize community boards' websites with their staff. For the past three years, we have observed and documented an explicit need for a contact management system for community boards. For the past four years, the city has told me that it will insource and adopt agile processes and technologies in line with what we have outlined. Yet, all that has come out of this are agency teams fighting night and day to implement those practices.¹³¹⁴

The underlying issues that COPIC is attempting to address are just as real today as they were 30 years ago!

The issues you have with 311 are fundamentally about poorly designed workflows—workflows that are enshrined in, rather than making use of, technology. The issues you have about after-school programs exist because people don't know how to use city databases — they are not "user friendly" and — they don't feature proper data validation. You raise issues about community board websites being outdated — without recognizing the inherent problem that they are supported by a tool built in the last century. If we want COPIC to exist and thrive, we have to take a hard look at what they oversee.

As of this month, most people access federal government websites with their mobile or tablet devices.¹⁵ Does New York City know this? No, we don't keep track of these metrics, and thus we don't build for mobile, which means, people have trouble accessing government sites. What happened to our Chief Digital Officer? What is going on with alpha.nyc.gov? What is DOITT doing to address government services for the digital era? Where are the marshaling of municipal resources to improve our City's communications technology?

⁹ <https://beta.nyc/?s=COPIC>

¹⁰ <https://opendata.cityofnewyork.us/open-data-law/>

¹¹ <http://www.govtech.com/people/New-York-City-CTO-Miguel-Gamino-Departs-for-Private-Sector.html>

¹² <http://www.gothamgazette.com/city/8001-de-blasio-names-new-chief-analytics-officer>

¹³ <https://planninglabs.nyc/>

¹⁴ <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/opportunity/portfolio/service-design-studio.page>

¹⁵ <https://twitter.com/gbinal/status/1092862863587373056>

We are the world's greatest city and one of the largest. We need to consider the implications of weak digital leadership. Even with the strongest COPIC, its impact would be a mere pinprick on what is needed. New York City needs a properly resourced government body that ensures city agencies are building / adopting modern, open technology. These teams should reflect other digital government success like 18F¹⁶ and the United States Digital Service¹⁷.

Beside my ardent belief in building technology from within government, I question how the Public Advocate, COPIC, and the Mayor's Offices will exist in a world with limited resources and expertise.

I conclude my testimony with a list of questions to help guide you through the reformation of COPIC.

Fundamental Questions:

- What is the future of public oversight of government data and public information?
- How do we ensure that COPIC's powers are complementary and do not create duplicative work for powers now enshrined in the City's collection of open data?
- What is the role of the Public Advocate in guiding and setting technology and data standards?
- Where are the archives of COPIC's advisory decisions? Have they been implemented? Have they been useful? What is COPIC's impact?

Questions for today:

- What has come of COPIC's current board? What is COPIC's current staffing, agenda, and resources?
- What is the role of DOITT and its Commissioner, the Chief Information Officer, in providing public facing digital services within NYC?
- What is the role of Chief Technology Officer or the Chief Digital Officer in providing public facing digital services within NYC?
- What is the role of the Public Advocate overseeing technology contracts and the City's information technology services?

Long term questions for COPIC:

- How do we get real public representation on COPIC? (Out of 12 members, four are paid and two are not appointed by the Mayor or City Council.)
- What is the role of the Public Advocate within the City's production of technology and data?
- How can we put adequate resources and oversight in place to bring NYC's public information platforms into the 21st century?
- In the face of an Administration that would want to dismantle / un-fund existing open data programs, what systems can we put in place to ensure appropriate oversight and protect the future of open data and public information technology platforms?

¹⁶ <https://18f.gsa.gov/>

¹⁷ <https://www.usds.gov/>