



To: Oversight & Investigations Committee
From: Brandon Muir
RE: Oversight & Investigations Committee Testimony
Date: June 19, 2017, 10:00 AM

Good Morning. To Chairman Gentile and the members of the Oversight and Investigations Committee, I thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

My name is Brandon Muir and I am the Executive Director of Reclaim New York, a non-profit, non-partisan 501(c)3 organization that seeks to educate and engage New Yorkers on issues like affordability and transparency.

Reclaim is dedicated to promoting increased transparency and accessibility in local government across the state. We have used the Freedom of Information Law and a list of Transparency Guidelines to work with municipalities across the state to help them become more transparent and accessible online. This not only serves to give citizens increased access to their local government, but helps government to streamline processes, gather business intelligence, and become better stewards of their resources.

I am here today to comment on two proposals – Intro. 1633 and Intro. 1618.

Bill 1633 requires the Department of Investigation to complete vendor name checks for city vendors thirty days prior to the commencement of a contract. It is our understanding that this measure ensures that no vendor contracts could commence without a verification being completed. That requirement would increase public confidence in the contracting process. While citizens would be glad to know that existing data shows nearly all vendors are being vetted, gaps do exist.

Closing that gap and requiring 100 percent vetting to ensure that the city does not do business with vendors who have a checkered past is a step in the right direction.

Bill 1618 requires the Department of Investigation to conduct public outreach efforts to educate the public about identifying and submitting complaints regarding government corruption, fraud, and waste. As Reclaim is an organization that empowers citizens to play a more active role in government oversight, driven by very similar campaigns to raise awareness, we strongly support the intention of this bill.

As a strong defender of the taxpayer in New York, it will be important for the campaigns to identify – and make public – specific metrics that judge the efficacy of the ad campaigns. Government engagement by citizens, especially regarding corruption, is not easy to facilitate and the ad campaigns would be just one of many variables supporting this effort. Quantifiable reporting metrics, delivered quarterly to the City Council, will assist in assuring the offering is on target and continually improved.

The bill would also require the Department to submit an annual report of complaints filed. As Reclaim enters the third year of our statewide transparency project, I'd like to share two key lessons we've learned on the reporting habits of local government officials.

Consistent citizen oversight relies on citizens understanding the “rules of the game.” Requiring each agency under this bill's purview to maintain a clear reporting process for ethics violation on its

website, would facilitate stronger civic engagement. The barrier to completion must be kept as low as possible.



Citizen oversight is habit forming, but habits rely on consistency. A once-a-year posting schedule would prohibit timely review for citizens, data specialists, and journalists who raise the challenging questions that lead to better governance. The disaggregated presentation of data is an important component, along with machine-readability.

Ideally, as soon as a complaint is filed, it should be registered and viewable in a privacy-protected context on the Department's website. Upon complaint resolution, the information should be made available as quickly as possible, with 30-60 days being an upper limit. The annual report should serve as the agency's opportunity to highlight quarterly improvements and for the public to assess the trajectory of the agencies responsiveness.

On behalf of Reclaim New York, I support the City Council's consideration of two bills that would increase transparency in city government and help facilitate citizen-driven oversight. Our recommendations are offered to strengthen the bills on behalf of transparency.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment and I would be happy to answer any questions the council members might have.