



**Testimony of Jessica Singleton, Office of the Mayor  
New York City Council Committee on Technology  
Hearing on  
Introduction 471 (We the People Online Petition Bill)**

October 1, 2014

Good morning Chairman Vacca and members of the City Council Committee on Technology. My name is Jessica Singleton, and I am the Digital Director for the City of New York. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Intro 471, which would require the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications, or DoITT, to establish a website allowing the public to create and sign online petitions, and requiring City agencies and authorities to post responses to those petitions. With me today is Donald Sunderland, DoITT's Deputy Commissioner for Application Development Management.

Digital engagement is a major priority of Mayor de Blasio's. From the first day of this administration, there has been a clear, focused attempt to find innovative new ways of interacting with New York City residents. To emphasize its importance, my unit, NYC Digital, now operates out of City Hall. As the Digital Director, I report directly to the Senior Advisor to the Mayor, Peter Ragone. I oversee digital engagement for the City and have been charged by Mayor de Blasio to make New York City the most digitally-engaged city in the world.

My office oversees digital engagement for the City of New York and the goals of my office include:

- Ensure that the Office of the Mayor and every City agency develop and maintain a robust social media presence that engages the New Yorkers we serve.
  - – In addition to original outbound content, many agencies have developed criteria, in consultation with my office, for responding directly to constituent requests for information or direct services. These criteria and sample questions or replies vary across government but common solutions are directing someone via a link to 311 or another link to more information.
- Use data to measure engagement and online sentiment. We use analytics to measure the quality of our engagement and use the data collected from these reports to inform our approach and help determine how we can best serve our customers: New Yorkers. Additionally, we use reporting tools to measure sentiment about any number of issues over any give period of time.
- Develop a roadmap for putting the entire City on a mobile-responsive site. Like the nyc.gov homepage, every agency's web presence will be optimized for a mobile device.
- Identify opportunities for digital tools to improve the user-experience and outcomes of programs and services.

- Working with Don and the rest of my DoITT colleagues, we developed a pre-k find and apply mobile search tool. Before the tool existed, parents going to [nyc.gov/prek](http://nyc.gov/prek) were directed to print a .pdf form and hand deliver an application to various pre-k sites. The find and apply tool that we developed enabled parents to begin the application process on their smart phone. The location-based tool populated search results based on the user's location and gave parents a way to begin the pre-k application process right then from their phone.
- Utilize SMS short codes. Many of the City agencies use SMS shortcodes tools to send text message updates and receive text message feedback or request for more information from New Yorkers. The SMS short-code infrastructure is managed at an agency level and we are exploring ways to centralize this system and data so that we are able to share even more information and receive feedback from even more New Yorkers.

Operate official City email program. City Hall has an email program and user data-base, which enables us to send email updates from voice of City Hall and elsewhere in City government and create form-field pages to collect additional feedback from users.

In addition to these initiatives, the administration has been focusing on directly engaging the public whenever and wherever possible, improving on old models and developing new ones. This is by no means an exhaustive list but I hope it will give you a sense of the Administration's commitment to using digital tools as one means of improving the delivery of services to our customers: New Yorkers.

Additionally, we have strengthened and, where necessary, created new offline community engagement units at every agency. This began with the overhaul of the Mayor's Community Affairs Unit. Now, every agency has a group specifically dedicated to the interaction with individual community members and stakeholders who are directly impacted by the work of that agency.

In addition, the Mayor's Office of Correspondence plays a vital role in ensuring that all those who write to the City receive a timely response as well as answer to their questions and help navigating City government. The Office aims to respond to every single letter sent directly to the Mayor. Over two thirds of these letters are delivered electronically. A significant number are sent via a mobile-responsive page on *NYC.gov*, which have category classifications (<http://www.nyc.gov/html/static/pages/officeofthemayor/contact.shtml>). Upon receiving correspondence, they typically reroute it to the correct entity or follow up directly on behalf of the Mayor's Office.

You are all familiar with NYC 311, which has revolutionized the way individuals interact with City agencies. With few exceptions, 311 calls and online actions result in one of the following:

1. Service request (the City needs to do something)
2. Information Request (Is Alternate Side Parking in effect? When is my trash pick-up day?, etc.)
3. Referral to an outside entity (MTA, NYS, District Attorney, etc.)

This system allows the City to track a preponderance of requests or complaints about any of the three categories, and measure the sentiment. 311 allows anyone to directly contact the City and seek help in navigating City government and accessing the services available to them. This also provides one avenue through which individuals can express concerns or frustrations that they may have with the City.

NYC 311, of course, remains the most popular means for customer engagement with City government. Since 2003, 311 has received nearly 200 million calls on all manner of City issues, and has expanded in that time to include round-the-clock access via the web, text, Skype, Twitter, and mobile app. Complaints filed through any of these channels are routed directly to the appropriate City agency for follow up, with Service Level Agreements in place defining the timeline within which agencies must respond. The public may also use 311 to file comments directly with the Mayor or complaints about any City agency or employee.

311's backend data collection service is robust, and NYC Digital is now working with 311 to consider new ways of collecting and interpreting this data to track and respond directly to specific and threshold number of complaints.

Returning to digital engagement, we recognize that in a networked economy, the barrier for communication between government and the public it serves should be in-step with the way people communicate with each other. And yet, petitions are only as strong as the people who organize them. The truth is the WeThePeople model fell short in part because there was no email program or supporting digital organizing infrastructure to ensure that users returned to the site and moved up the ladder of engagement.

In 2014, a government-sponsored petition tool is a waning model in the age of direct engagement. And the White House version of the petition tool that inspired this bill can help illustrate some of the shortcomings of a petition model.

The Obama Administration first sought to give individuals and groups a means to express themselves and set a standard for when a response was necessary. This website allowed for a situation in which a series of concerns must reach a specific threshold before receiving a response.

This was not the result of the White House site. Instead, the site has in some ways become a dumping ground. A number of these petitions were either frivolous or not grounded in serious policy goals and very few have spurred specific action beyond a single response. As New York City officials, we constantly seek to better understand popular sentiment and what is driving the conversation – online and off.

The goal of this Administration is to respond to every single New Yorker in a timely manner. This is clearly a big challenge and there will be times when this is difficult. But through technological advancement and a streamlining of our systems, we will work to ensure that all receive a response, not just those whose point of view reaches a pre-determined threshold. This is the future of digital engagement: One-on-one communication and service.

It is our belief that we should not establish a threshold for the point at which New Yorkers receive a response. Rather, it is our goal to engage with constituents directly, regardless of how many others share their point of view.

Creating a threshold for response silences too many – whereas with direct digital engagement, everyone can be heard, not just those who organize around it.

Furthermore, it is important to note that a number of private websites provide the same online infrastructure that the bill seeks to create. It is our view that government does not need to reinvent the wheel; we need to deliver better outcomes for New Yorkers.

In an age of taking a data-driven approach to governance, data analytics defines our approach to digital engagement. We use aggregate data to measure the sentiments of our end-users but our bottom line is measured by our ability to deliver services to every single New Yorker. And we believe the digital tools we have in place and in the pipeline for development do this much better than a government sponsored petition would.

In conclusion, while we greatly appreciate the intent of this bill, we do not believe it to be the most effective model to achieve its goals. The White House Model showed, and I firmly believe, that government sponsored petitions are not the most effective means to engage and gauge the public's views.

Using all of the digital engagement pieces I have described today, we measure aggregate sentiment, and our fundamental commitment is to provide direct services to individuals. The aggregate means that the sum can be greater than its parts and have the same effect as a petition - while also helping people directly, which a petition cannot do.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

To: NYC Council - Committee on Technology, Chairperson Vacca

From: David Moore & Maryam Gunja, Participatory Politics Foundation

Re: **Online Petitions for NYC Council**

September 30th, 2014



Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony in support of online public petitions for NYC municipal government. We're the Participatory Politics Foundation, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization with a mission to increase civic engagement and longtime member of BetaNYC.

We're heartened to hear of the proposed legislation by Councilmember Vacca for an online petition platform for NYC Council leadership. (Official text of introduced legislation as of 9-02-14, 5:15pm.) It validates the principles of responsive, publicly accountable government.

We believe a truly "bottom-up" platform for the public to petition their local elected officials offers a huge public benefit. As I wrote on Sept. 11th in a blog post on this topic, I was pleased that CM Vacca's staff consulted with me & BetaNYC's Noel Hidalgo in recent weeks, to gather input on the broad design of such an online petition platform for NYC Council.

In February 2014, PPF launched our latest flagship project: AskThem, which works as a questions-and-answers and petition platform for NYC government. And not just New York city & state, but for public figures and politicians nationwide. AskThem is a version of the White House's "We the People" petition site - where over 8 million people have taken action - but for every elected official: federal, state, county, and city levels of government. AskThem is uniquely free, open-source, non-profit and non-partisan, with open data for informed communities. Eight elected officials in NY have agreed to respond on AskThem to popular public questions and AskThem has pages for nearly all 51 council members and Mayor de Blasio, **incl. CM Vacca from the Bronx**. (Ask away!)

AskThem has access to official government data for over 142,000 elected officials nationwide, from local city council members up to the U.S. Congress. Questions on AskThem circulate like online petitions to a threshold, at which point they're delivered over email and social media for a public response. Early AskThem adopters include Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer, Council Members Brad Lander, Ben Kallos, Helen Rosenthal, Antonio Reynoso, Mark Levine, and NY State Senator Brad Hoylman. AskThem serves as a public accountability tool for continual dialogue with local elected officials and we welcome more volunteer partners in NYC Council offices, we provide this platform at no cost.

From our experience in the field of online petitioning, PPF recommends the below best-practices be adopted into the legislative language for the NYC petition site ::

1. Enforcement so that any valid petition that reaches the threshold receives a public response within a set timeframe. Without this strong enforcement mechanism, the platform may lose public trust and momentum - see this article from our nonprofit advisor, Prof. Dave Karpf, "[How 'We the People' Became a Virtual Ghost-Town](#)".
2. Requirements that #PetitionNYC petition information (not nec. full user info) be shareable with other websites for civic engagement and online dialogue.
  - 2.1. This would require, in technical implementation of #PetitionNYC, an open "read-write" API, so that independent websites can display popular petitions, local topics and trending issue areas from #PetitionNYC for their communities.
  - 2.2. And so that #PetitionNYC may intake popular petitions on other sites, such as non-profit AskThem or commercial websites such as Change.org and others.
  - 2.3. It would prefer open-source code & libre licensing, which is important if this NYC legislation serves to become a national model for online petitioning.

The benefit of an open API is primarily to ensure that a diverse landscape of websites can submit ideas and popular public initiatives to the NYC platform, widening participation. It's technically straightforward to customize the NYC site to highlight only the petitions coming in through other APIs that have already received a certain threshold of signatures of support. (The email and street address information of other petition signers may not be transmitted, but the popularity can certainly be verified in other ways.)

In fact, AskThem can provide this same petition functionality to the City Council and wider public straightforwardly and affordably off our existing code. One development path is to build free petition widgets that embed on council members' pages, then delivers user petition information by email or API to central council staff, however preferred. This buildout would likely cost a fraction of having DoITT start anew, even leveraging the free software available.

Our non-profit, PPF, and BetaNYC are ready and eager to advise on other aspects of implementation for #PetitionNYC, such as the following ::

- A. How and when to verify that a #PetitionNYC site user is a **constituent** of a given NYC council district. On AskThem, we enable questions to be published and shared, and if they approach threshold we check zip-codes on user signatures and the district of the petition creator / sponsor. This generates more public conversation, which we view as much needed.
- B. Signature **thresholds** - currently the AskThem threshold-for-question-delivery to a city council member's office is 25 user signatures, of which approx. half should be constituents. It's straightforward to do common-sense, brief staff outreach to petition

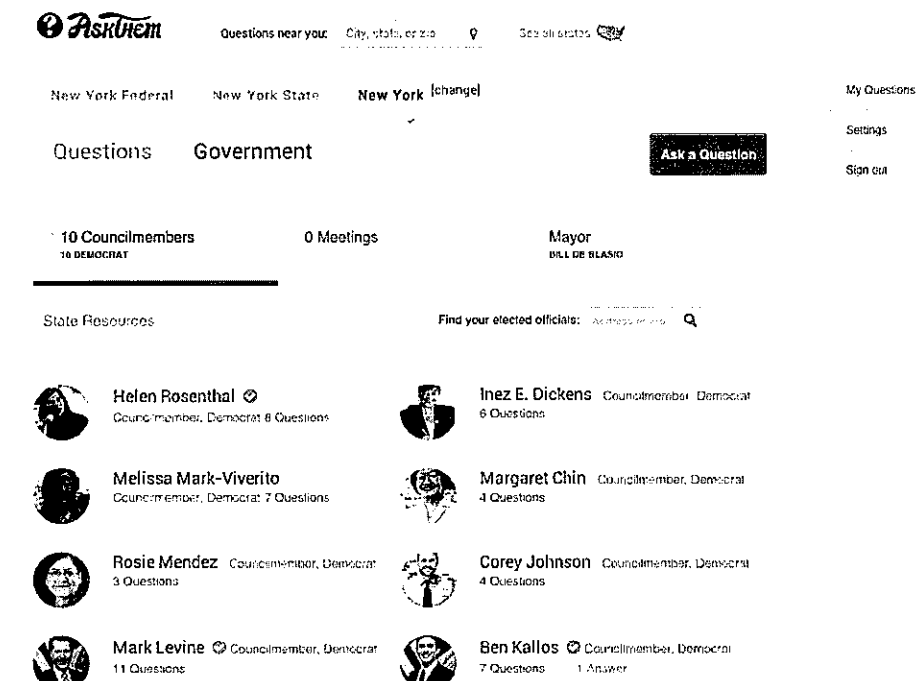
creators to check their good faith. We aspire to a threshold of 0.1% of a jurisdiction's population, which if a NYC council district has approx. 175,000 residents, would be 175 signatures to deliver for a public response - this is our target metric for state & federal districts in the future as well, and can/should be adjusted dynamically.

C. **Open-source code** - our AskThem code is open and ready to remix, and several other solutions are available, including the White House's "We The People" code. We'd be excited to work with DoITT on re-using our open Ruby on Rails code and customizing it for city council staff members as a national example in free software.

D. **Online dashboards** - I praise CM Vacca's draft legislation for maintaining an "automated reporting system, available to the public" of petition info - this is a strong accountability feature, if its data is kept timely and displayed transparently.

We look forward to continuing to work with CM Vacca's office on developing a free, open, responsive petition platform for NYC Council. Glad to see NYC Council Tech Committee and leadership pushing ahead the state of the art for accountable digital government.

*Below, screenshot of Manhattan NYC Council Members on AskThem - dozens more CM's from NY & other boroughs are findable on other pages (BK), and through search ::*



*David Moore & Maryam Gunja - Participatory Politics Foundation - [AskThem.io](http://AskThem.io) - [drm@ppolitics.org](mailto:drm@ppolitics.org) - (917) 753-3462 - we're proudly based in NYC.*

To: NYC Council - Committee on Technology  
From: A BetaNYC community Member



Re: **Online Petitions for NYC Council, aka PetitionNYC**

1 October 2014

---

To the NYC Committee on Technology & Chairperson Vacca,

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

I am a member of BetaNYC, a member driven good government organization. Currently, we are over 2,000 members. Our mission is to build a city powered by the people, for the people, for the 21st Century. Last year, we published a "*People's Roadmap to a Digital New York City*" where we outline the people's digital roadmap.<sup>1</sup>

In *The People's Roadmap*, we outline the need for New York City government to adopt an online self-organizing tool that permits individuals to petition their government.<sup>2</sup> We value the creation of such a tool to be paramount.

We see this Int 0471-2014 as a complement to NYC 311, the city's inquiry and complaint line.<sup>3</sup> For over ten years, New Yorkers have had a central location to find out about civic services and complain about them. Currently, NYC 311 permits individuals to use their cell phone and report on 19 categories.<sup>4</sup>

NYC 311 is not the only online complaint line. This summer, NYC's Department of Transportation pioneered an online map and permitted the public to flag design problems with intersections and help achieve vision zero.<sup>5</sup>

Together, these tools allow for the public to self-organize and report on municipal problems. But where can the public go to suggest new ideas and improvements?

---

<sup>1</sup> People's Roadmap to the Digital City, <http://NYCroadmap.us>

<sup>2</sup> Create "We the People of NYC," a petition tool for any elected representative, <http://nycroadmap.us/#1>

<sup>3</sup> Intro 0471-2014,

<http://legistar.council.nyc.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=1903360&GUID=A4113BB8-C69B-492F-A3C7-8575E63306ED&Options=&Search=>

<sup>4</sup> Mayor Bloomberg Commemorates Ten Years Of Nyc311, The Nation's Largest And Most Comprehensive 311 Service,

<http://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/089-13/mayor-bloomberg-commemorates-ten-years-nyc311-nation-s-largest-most-comprehensive-311>

<sup>5</sup> NYC.gov's Vision Zero Map, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/visionzero/pages/dialogue/map.html>



## Listening to the people

In 2011, the White House and New York City government pioneered a path. That year, New York City deployed “*Change by us.*” This public-private partnership enabled citizens to organize or join projects to improve their communities.<sup>67</sup> Sadly, this tool is online but no one seems to be listening.

Again in 2011, NYC’s Department of Transportation launched a website that permitted the public to annotate and organize around desired bike share locations.<sup>8</sup> Painfully, we wait for Citi Bike NYC to stay solvent and roll out the stations we requested.

That same year, the White House launched “*We the People.*” While it is the only one of the three that is still running, its operations have evolved and influenced the development of two other notable sites.

Currently, the only official City website that allows citizens to self-organize and petition the city on their ideas is the City’s Rules website.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, we are blessed that a hand full of Councilmembers see similar value and have started to use Participatory Politics Foundation’s *AskThem*.<sup>10</sup>

These tools are just the tip of the iceberg. This city needs an open and digital petition platform.

## What is needed

Twitter, Facebook, 311, and private constituent complaints have proven their value. We can complain, but ideas only go so far. We need this government to take our engagement opportunities to the next level. We need a 21st century participatory government to value the public’s ideas and be a transparent steward on replying to them.

### **BetaNYC supports the creation of #PetitionNYC but has some reservations.**

First, we need this bill to have appropriate enforcement provisions. While we are ok with DOITT hosting and managing this site, we are concerned that some issues might not get the proper oversight. Looking at the architecture of the City Charter, we encourage the Public Advocate to

---

<sup>6</sup> Change by us, <http://nyc.changeby.us/#start>

<sup>7</sup> Note, Change by us’ blog has not been updated since Nov 20, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> City Unveils Locations of Bike-Share Stations,

[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/12/nyregion/city-unveils-locations-of-bike-share-stations.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/12/nyregion/city-unveils-locations-of-bike-share-stations.html?_r=0)

<sup>9</sup> NYC Rules, <http://rules.cityofnewyork.us>

<sup>10</sup> AskThem, <http://www.askthem.io>

have an active role in the oversight of these petitions, and hope this can be codified in the proposed legislation.

Second, this tool needs to be built for the 21st century. It needs to be ready for people's pockets, be mobile responsive, and have an API to empower 3rd party petition sites to engage in the marketplace of ideas.

Lastly, our third concern is cost. The White House's "We the People" and Participatory Politics Foundation's "Ask them" are open source projects. This means the City can inexpensively re-deploy one or both of these proven tools. It is fiscally prudent for the city to adopt and maintain an open source solution that can be developed as a shared and collective resource.

With these concerns, we thank the City Council for their leadership and hope this great city implements #PetitionNYC.



**CITIZENS UNION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK**  
**Testimony to the**  
**Committee on Technology in Government of the New York City Council**  
**On Intro 471 – Online Petitions**  
**October 1, 2014**

---

Good morning, Chair Vacca, and other members of the Committee on Technology in Government. My name is Rachael Fauss, and I am the Director of Public Policy of Citizens Union of the City of New York, a nonpartisan good government group dedicated to making democracy work for all New Yorkers.

The legislation presents a novel idea for citizen engagement that is worthy of discussion, and we are pleased that you are holding a hearing for that purpose. We have not yet taken a position on the bill, though we have had preliminary discussions about the draft and its intent. As such, I will be providing Citizens Union's initial thoughts today. We recognize that the hearing process is intended to allow for comments and will likely result in revisions to the bill, and will plan to continue to examine the bill as it progresses through the legislative process.

Our preliminary thoughts cover two major areas: governance and implementation, which I will describe below.

**Governance**

In examining the creation of a portal to allow New Yorkers to ask questions of government, Citizens Union believes there are larger philosophical questions that should be considered such as whether government should have a role at all in the arena of organizing citizens to influence the actions of government.

- 1. Government as Citizen Organizer** – What is the appropriate role of government in soliciting citizen participation and organizing public opinion about government policies and actions? We have questions about whether government as the policy decision maker should also be involved in organizing citizen activity to influence the outcome of the very decision it makes. Government controlling too much of the process might open up the decision-making to possible manipulation to serve a predetermined outcome.
- 2. Checks and Balances** – How do we ensure appropriate oversight of the petition program and reporting on its implementation to ensure the independence and integrity of the process?
- 3. Goals and Purpose** – Do the mechanisms as currently delineated in the legislation achieve the stated goals of increasing transparency and accountability?

## **Implementation**

In assessing the legislation based on the framework outlined above and its potential implementation, we believe that there are several areas that should be examined for potential changes to the legislation. We recognize that it was drafted broadly in order to allow for a greater discussion of its intent and goals, and have appreciated the ability to already speak with your office about the legislation. Specifically, we urge the Council and Chair to consider the following:

1. **Checks and Balances** – under the current legislation, the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DOITT), which is a mayoral agency would determine the threshold, all of the details of the implementation, how the details can be changed, how the site will function, how users can participate, and how to oversee the compliance of the governmental bodies who are petitioned. If this is meant to operate as some form of check on city government, which is predominantly the mayoral administration, then policies and regular oversight should be under supervision – or at least in collaboration – with another branch of government or another independently elected official.
  - a. **Possible solution:** The Public Advocate could be involved in developing policies with DOITT, and overseeing its administration/compliance in responding to petitions.
2. **Users** – Under the current proposal, there is no specificity regarding users of the portal. Some questions that may be worthy of Council consideration in this regard are:
  - a. Who can sign petitions? Should there be an age requirement, or residency requirement?
  - b. Is there a way to prevent businesses, lobbying interests, or politicians from flooding the site?
  - c. Should DOITT provide information regarding usage in reports that examines the influence of particular groups in the petition process?
3. **Parameters for Creation of Petitions** – As previously state, the legislation as currently drafted provides DOITT as the implementing agency, which would be responsible presumably for determining how petitions are submitted and the types and categories of petitions that are permissible. Some questions that may be worthy of Council consideration in this regard are:
  - a. What thresholds are appropriate for determining when an agency response is triggered?
  - b. What gets asked, and how?
  - c. Is the petition to request an action, ask for information, or both?
  - d. Should there be parameters on what questions could be asked?
  - e. Who categorizes the questions which are then sent to the respondents?
  - f. Should there be any censorship of questions themselves?

Regarding the thresholds for determining agency responses, one possible solution would be to develop a threshold formula in the bill itself, or to put in specific procedures for determining/amending threshold in the bill.

- 4. Oversight of Responses** – Under the legislation, agencies are responsible for responding to individual petitions, but DOITT is responsible for aggregating response rates from particular agencies. There is no specific mandate on responses. DOITT will issue requests every 6 months for responses, and will publish whichever responses it receives in a report to the City Council and Mayor, which is also published online. Some questions that may be worthy of Council consideration in this regard are:
  - a. Who at the agency would respond?
  - b. What is a mandate vs what is a suggestion?
  - c. Who monitors/pushes for responses?
  - d. Should there be a role for the Public Advocate or another entity, in collaboration with DOITT, examining response rates of agencies?
  - e. How are the responses reported in the report? Would it include responses have been denied/ignored, both on website and in annual report?
  - f. Should there be a mandated time frame for responding - either in legislation or rules?
  
- 5. Costs** – Citizens Union recognizes that there may be costs associated with implementing this proposal, both in terms of staff time, as well as development of the portal, though there are open source petition portals that could potentially be used. An additional consideration that we would like to raise is a potential opportunity cost. With DOITT currently implementing many transparency initiatives long advocated for by the good government community - webcasting and Open Data for example – the Council should ensure that these initiatives are able to be fully realized, while it examines new mandates for DOITT.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and am available to answer any questions you have.

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 471 Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 10/1/14

Name: Jessica Singleton (PLEASE PRINT)

Address: City Hall

I represent: Mayor's Office

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 471 Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 1 October 2014

Name: Deputy Commissioner Donald Sanchez-Land (PLEASE PRINT)

Address: 2 MetroTech Center 4th Floor

I represent: Department of Information Technology & Telecommunications

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 10-1-14

Name: David Moore (PLEASE PRINT)

Address: 146 Lafayette St. 12th Fl.

I represent: Participatory Politics Foundation

Address: (same)

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 471 Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 10/1/14

Name: Rachael Fauss (PLEASE PRINT)

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: Citizens Union

Address: 299 Broadway Suite 700

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms