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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

**Testimony of Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Borough President
Regarding New York City's Open Data Portal
New York City Council Committee on Technology
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My name is Gale Brewer, and I am the Manhattan Borough President. I would like to thank Chairman Vacca and the members of the Committee on Technology for holding this hearing today. As you may know, I was the Primary Sponsor of Local Law 11 of 2012, the Open Data Law. As Borough President, I am still paying close attention to the implementation of the Law, so I am very pleased that you have scheduled this oversight hearing today.

As the Committee knows, implementation of the law has been a major undertaking, and the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DoITT) deserves tremendous credit for continuing implementation across two administrations. I am very pleased that the Mayor has announced the appointment of Dr. Amen Ra Mashariki as the City's new Chief Analytics Officer, and Minerva Tantoco as the City's Chief Technology Officer. With exceptional leadership at DoITT, the Mayor's Office of Data Analytics (MODA), and the Mayor's Office of Technology and Innovation, I am confident that New York City can continue to lead the nation in municipal data initiatives.

Now, this is not to say that implementation of the law has been perfect. Understandably, some agencies have been slow to embrace a new way of doing business, one where the default setting for government data has switched to Open. For far too long, many agencies operated in their own silos, and were hesitant or outright hostile to sharing their data

with other agencies, much less with the public. I think most of us in government now realize the shortcomings of that attitude, but changing behavior is difficult. I know that it is not easy for agencies with limited resources to focus on open data. That is why it is contingent on leadership at DoITT and MODA to make it as easy as possible to share data, including automating data outputs, facilitating data mining and creating data visualization overlays whenever possible. To get a sense of the paradigm shift, and how an agency can leapfrog others in relation to Open Data, one needs only to look at the New York City Police Department. After decades with a reputation for being closed off and hesitant to share public data, the NYPD is now looking at innovative ways to make their data publicly available and responsive to residents' needs, while balancing confidentiality issues and capturing operational efficiencies in the process. I am grateful that they have met with me, and members of the civic technology world on their plans, and I look forward to positive results. When Law Enforcement meets Civic Hacking, we will all be better off.

Outside of agency issues, a major concern is the primary topic of today's hearing: the Open Data portal itself. From the beginning, amateurs and experts alike have been frustrated by searchability and other functionality issues with Socrata's portal. One challenge during the past two years has been a difficulty in understanding if a search result is official city data or a filtered view saved by a user. This flaw has cluttered the portal with multiple views of the same underlying data. Again, I want to thank DoITT here, as they have recently made some simple fixes to the problem. To begin with, making the default search function "Official Data" only will eliminate much of the confusion, helping one query the most relevant datasets on the topic. I want to thank DoITT for responding to complaints, and making this change to the portal.

Another issue that must be addressed is a perceived lack of responsiveness to public requests for data from agencies and/or DoITT; the public has lots of questions about datasets.

Data integrity issues are a real concern, as are requests from the public for high-value datasets. When we negotiated this bill, we were lenient in our timeline for requiring agencies to publish all qualifying data. However, this leniency was due to assurances that requests from the public for high-value data would be taken seriously by agencies. My understanding is that this simply has not been the case thus far. This must be improved for this legislation to be successful. I know that there are ongoing discussions about how to improve interaction between agencies and the public, but I want to reiterate the importance we must place on this issue. If we want the technology sector, and the public at large, to use Open Data, we must listen to their questions and concerns, address them properly, and improve our performance. These are basic issues of competence and trust. Without them, people simply won't use the site, and neither government nor the public will benefit from the promise of Open Data to improve service delivery, accountability, transparency and performance.

In closing, I want to offer a positive report on what my office is doing with the data. As Borough President, one of my responsibilities is appointing members to, and providing oversight of, Manhattan's twelve Community Boards. Community Boards are New York's neighborhood City Halls, but due to their limited budgets and training they have been unable to do complex data analysis. Community Boards should be ideal consumers of city data sets on 311 and 911 trends in their neighborhood, construction permits, demographic shifts, zoning and more. For example, Community Boards play an important role in land use review. For far too long, they have been at a severe disadvantage when faced by complex development proposals. Community Boards have been forced to rely on anecdotal evidence to make decisions that really should be driven by data. In order to help equip Boards with the capacity to use city datasets for decision-making, my office is training interns from the CUNY Service Corps to work as Open Data Corp Members in all 12 Manhattan Community Board District offices. We expect to have them assigned soon, to work on discrete data projects involving

such pressing issues as UPK seats, Vision Zero, affordable housing, quality of life complaints, and more. In the near future, we hope to offer even more dedicated resources to the Boards so as to expand their mapping and GIS capabilities using this data. Additionally, we have launched a vigorous and robust training and technical assistance Community Board Leadership Series. On the data and mapping trainings offered, for example, we have partnered with the Department of City Planning to train 200 Community Board staff, chairs, committee chairs and members to use the community planning resources and tools the Department of City Planning has organized in one Community Portal website. My goal here is to provide the necessary training and technical assistance so that Community Boards can produce and submit the most data driven, visual, updated and supported Statement of District Needs using as much municipal open data as possible to make their case.

Turning the Open Data portal into everything we envisioned when we passed this law will require a lot more work. However, I am confident that we have the leaders within government, especially at DOITT, as well as from the private sector and non-profit community, notably the New York City Transparency Working Group, to ensure that the tool reaches its full potential. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify, and I'm happy to answer any questions.