



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN
THE CITY OF NEW YORK

1 Centre Street, 19th floor, New York, NY 10007
(212) 669-8300 p (212) 669-4306 f
431 West 125th Street, New York, NY 10027
(212) 531-1609 p (212) 531-4615 f
www.manhattanbp.nyc.gov

Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

**Testimony of Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Borough President
Regarding the Commission on Public Information and Communication
New York City Council Committee on Technology
February 12, 2019**

My name is Gale Brewer, and I am the Manhattan Borough President. I thank Speaker Corey Johnson, Chairman Peter Koo, and the members of the Committee on Technology for scheduling this hearing. As you may know, I was a member of the Commission of Public Information and Communication (COPIC) representing the City Council during my tenure in the Council, and the experience was partly responsible for my being the prime sponsor of New York City's Open Data Law.

The desire to improve government transparency that led to the creation of COPIC in 1989 remains an important motivating force today. To that end, New York City has made great strides and now boasts the most robust open data offerings of any municipality in the United States. This was made possible through strong leadership and the important input of our civic hacker community.

But the Commission is in dire need of restructuring to remain relevant and fulfill its purpose. Section 1061 of the New York City Charter clearly outlines the various duties COPIC is supposed to undertake. Many of those duties have been left by the wayside, only to be picked up by other stakeholders. COPIC's annual public hearing on city information policies has been replaced by the New York City Council Committee on Technology's annual oversight hearing on the Open Data Portal. The annual report the Commission is supposed to publish is instead put together by the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DOITT) and the Mayor's Office of Data Analytics (MODA). The charter tasks COPIC with making "recommendations regarding the application of new communications technology to improve public access to city produced or maintained information" [Section 1061 d (6)]. Instead, we lean on civic hack-tivists for this crucial input.

Beyond these role reassignments, COPIC is not living up to its original purpose in key areas. To the best of my knowledge, the Commission has not met since 2016 when the members helped to institute webcasts for public meetings. That was an achievement to be proud of. However, other ideas for civic tech could have been developed if the members of the Commission had met on a regular basis.

I said earlier that COPIC hasn't met since 2016 "to the best of my knowledge". That's because the Commission no longer has a website or a clear point of contact for information; this is ironic, considering its mandate for transparency.

Some of the reductions in the scope of COPIC resulted from a duplication of efforts among several agencies. However, there is clear value in having an organization composed of stakeholders from varied backgrounds dedicated to preserving government transparency. COPIC should be restructured and resourced to develop strategies to safeguard our open data platforms and the philosophy of open access. The restrictions on public information and its distortion and misuse for political purposes at the Federal level should alert us to the dangers that could occur locally.

The current degree of open data and access to government information was inconceivable in 1989. Looking to the future, we must reimagine the structure and role of COPIC in our open data ecosystem. It should be funded for a functioning website to ensure the public remains informed on data issues. The Commission should have a full-time staff that can help inform and enact the vision of the members while working in concert with DOITT and MODA to ensure we do not duplicate the efforts of city agencies. COPIC should meet quarterly to ensure a steady flow of information between internal and external stakeholders.

When Mayor de Blasio was the Public Advocate, COPIC met very rarely. I was the instigator of getting it to meet at all. As Public Advocate, de Blasio felt that any meaningful activity and agenda items that COPIC initiated would not be able to be implemented if staff funding was not in place. The Public Advocate's office did not have adequate funding to staff COPIC. I do not know why COPIC did not meet regularly more recently; the lack of funding for staff may have also been the reason. I was on the staff of Public Advocate Mark Green when COPIC was first initiated and there were regular meetings but even then a staff of 8 was contemplated and we did not have enough budget support.

Government transparency is vital. It makes government more accountable, empowers citizens and small businesses, and improves city services. There is much progress to be made on this front, and I will do all I can to ensure that the vision of the 2012 Open Data Law continues to inspire and inform such initiatives, and that New York City remains a national leader in municipal data innovation. COPIC is part of that vision and must be reinvented to ensure the continued success of New York City's Open Data offerings.

[Borough President Brewer held up the Commission on Public Information and Communication Public Data Directory, First Edition from April 1993]