



## **A Roadmap to Digital Inclusion and Open Government**

**NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL 2015**





# A Digital Transformation for the Council and New Yorkers



Photo: William Alatryste

I am excited to present **Council 2.0**, a roadmap for making the New York City Council more transparent and accessible through digital technology.

Rather than seek innovation for its own sake, we focused on people before products. We asked ourselves, how could the Council meet people where they are, on the platforms they are using? What are the ways the Council must transform so that it is open and digitally responsive to the people it is entrusted to serve? These questions guide our efforts.

We see digital platforms, such as social media, apps and texting as a means of encouraging New Yorkers, especially those in high-need communities, to make their voices heard. We want to facilitate more public decision-making, as with Participatory Budgeting, and believe that useful platforms should be integrated into the chief functions of the Council. Inclusion, civic engagement and open government are the pillars of our plan to weave digital into the fabric of the City Council's work.

This is a truly ground-breaking moment for the Council that will transform the way we do business. My colleagues and I are committed to keeping the Council at the leading edge of civic technology, which means this document is a jumping-off point instead of an end product. As civic technology improves, so will we.

I have been inspired by the interest and enthusiasm around this initiative and the possibilities are exponential. My colleagues and I look forward to working with community partners, government leaders, civic technologists and everyday New Yorkers on using tech to help usher in the People's Council.

**Melissa Mark-Viverito**  
**Speaker**



# OBJECTIVES

- ◉ **COMMITMENT TO DIGITAL INCLUSION**
- ◉ **CREATE A BETTER COUNCIL WEBSITE**
- ◉ **MEET NEW YORKERS WHERE THEY ARE**
- ◉ **POST THE COUNCIL'S BUSINESS ONLINE**
- ◉ **BUILD THE COUNCIL'S DIGITAL CAPACITY AND CREATE PARTNERSHIPS**
- ◉ **TRACK COUNCIL 2.0 PROGRESS AND REGULARLY EVALUATE**

## COMMIT TO DIGITAL INCLUSION

**ACTION AND OUTCOMES:**  
**A Digital Inclusion Summit in July 2015 to ensure the Council is bringing more, diverse New Yorkers into the civic dialogue.**



The introduction of Council 2.0 presents a key opportunity to expand the conversation about civic tech across social and economic lines. More New Yorkers will be made aware of the public data at their disposal and the opportunities to shape decision-making processes.

We believe the best way to encourage significant digital interaction is to speak directly to the people we are trying to reach and the organizations that serve

them. Accessibility and cultural competency must be at the forefront of the Council's digital strategies. That means creating technology that is thoughtful of the end user and their needs. A young person in the Rockaways may experience our website differently than a visually impaired senior in Chinatown or a parent in Corona.

Under the banner of Digital Inclusion, we will host a community summit to develop a guide of best practices for the Council. Based on this, we will test digital engagement technology to bring diverse communities into meaningful contact with their elected representatives. This approach should be central to the way we do business, no matter the platform.

## CREATE A BETTER COUNCIL WEBSITE

**ACTION AND OUTCOMES:**  
**Design and launch an experimental and mobile-friendly website that aims to strengthen communication and engagement between**

**Council Members and New Yorkers.**

During Fall 2015, the Council will unveil an experimental site at Labs.council.nyc. This digital laboratory will allow us to be flexible, test new ideas, and share information that is more relevant to the lives New Yorkers, while also exploring different models for Council Member's web pages.

**The Council will conduct focus groups comprised of a diverse cross-section of New Yorkers to test a website that will:**

- ◉ Offer a positive user experience through simple navigation and clean organization that is viewable on any device
- ◉ Post timely information and frequent updates of the Council's work
- ◉ Make it easy for people to find information they are looking for
- ◉ Clearly explain the responsibilities of the Speaker and Council
- ◉ Consider the needs of diverse audiences such as immigrants, seniors and youth
- ◉ Direct New Yorkers to entry points for civic participation in local government
- ◉ Provide a menu of tools that allow Council Members to engage with New Yorkers more effectively

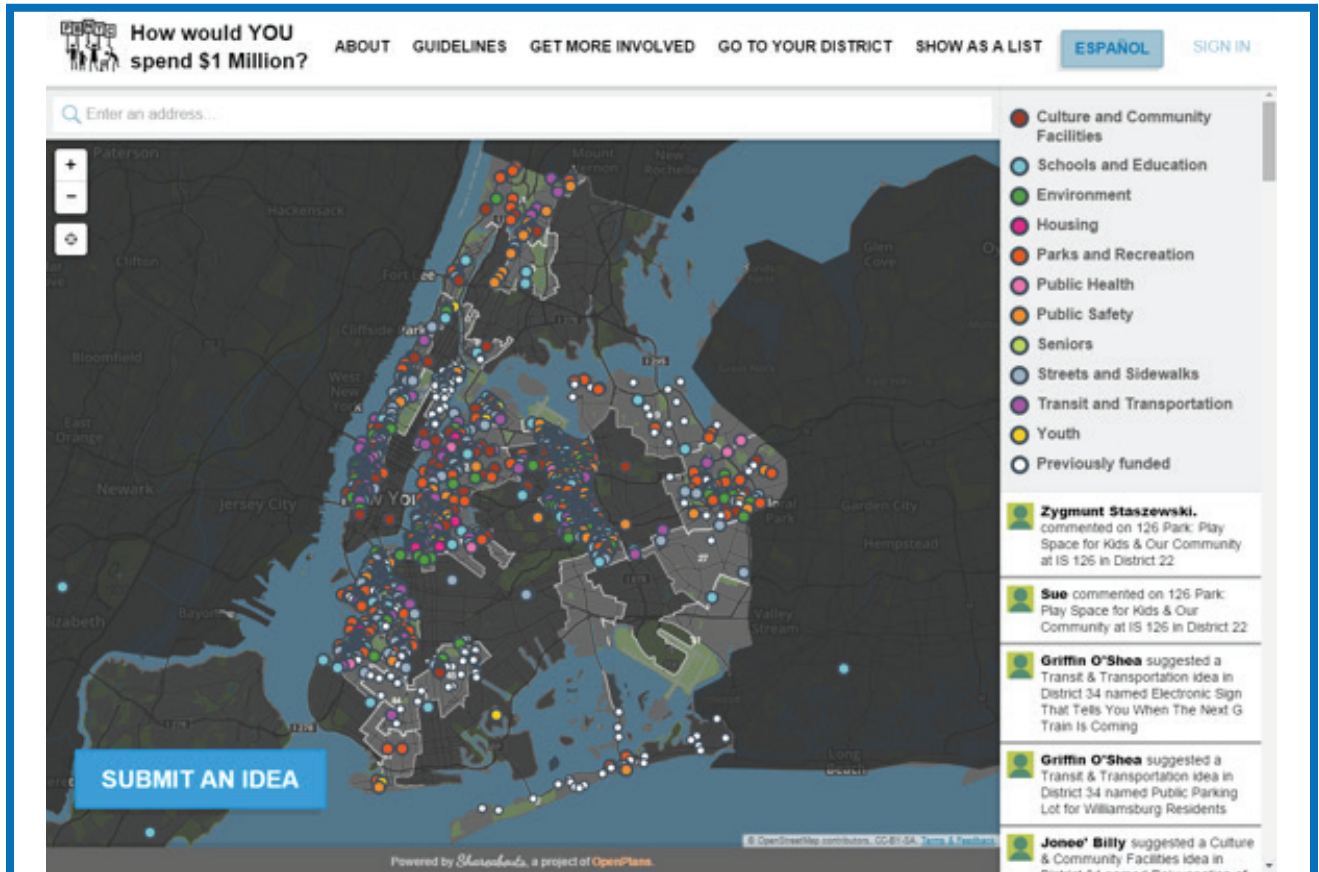
- ◉ Explore user-generated content that can help close the gap with how different audiences experience government

Feedback from our focus groups will help improve the functionality, content and evolution of the site. They will also help the Council develop new online tools.

The Council has already taken concrete steps to introduce online tools. Now the public can use ZeeMaps to see where the City's recent street co-namings are located and learn about the inspiring people they are named after. We also created an interactive online map where New Yorkers posted approximately 1,700 ideas for PB projects in their communities.

The Council also launched an online map of this year's proposed PB projects ([m.pbny.org/map](http://m.pbny.org/map)) to allow New Yorkers to easily see what is on the ballot in their community.

For the PB vote this April, New Yorkers will be able to quickly find out if they live in a participating Council district, and if so, where they can go vote on proposed projects. This information is available on the PB section of the Council's website ([council.nyc.gov/PB](http://council.nyc.gov/PB)), as well as a mobile-optimized website ([m.pbny.org](http://m.pbny.org)).





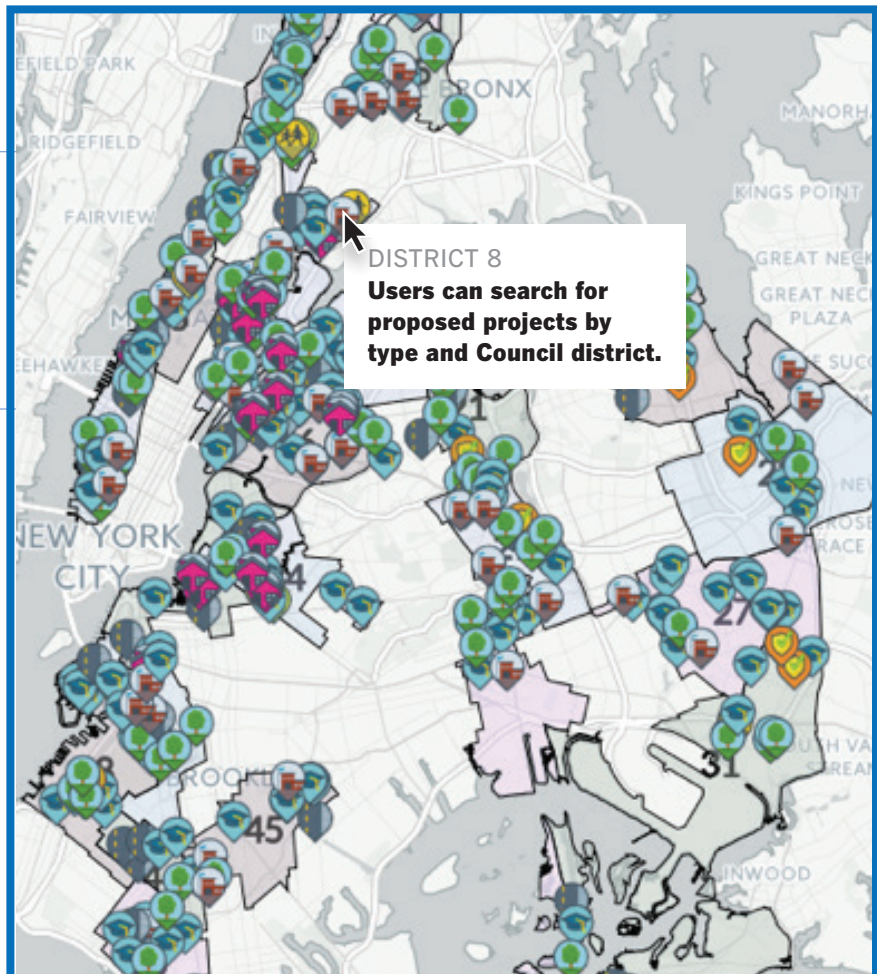
## MEET NEW YORKERS WHERE THEY ARE

**ACTION AND OUTCOME:** Council pilots a texting initiative and determines other opportunities for public engagement through texting.

### TEXTING

We want to bring more New Yorkers into conversation with the Council by engaging the public on platforms where they are already digitally active.

Studies by the Pew Research Center show that mobile technology is the best way to digitally engage the public, and a recent survey of low-income New Yorkers conducted by Blue Ridge Labs found that texting was the preferred mode of communication via mobile phone. The rate of use among communities greatly differs: Latinos text 156%



more than Caucasians, while African Americans by an increase of 224%.

New Yorkers laid the foundation of ideas for PB and now the Council, in partnership with Textizen, has launched a texting platform to boost participation for the PB vote. Through texting, New Yorkers can sign up to receive alerts about what is on their PB ballot and when and where they can go vote. They can also spread the word to their friends and neighbors. Enrollment and activation is in English initially with the potential to integrate other languages in the future.



By conducting this trial run, Council staff will be able to evaluate the effectiveness of text-messaging-based engagement and how this platform could be expanded to support digital inclusion and civic participation.

## GETTING SOCIAL

**ACTION AND OUTCOMES:**  
**A social media team will help Members use local demographic data and analytics to drive interaction and feedback with the Council.**

Social media platforms are more than just new ways to have a conversation. When used creatively and widely, they can help bring government to the people.

The Council has already begun to incorporate social media into its community engagement strategies and will work to expand the ways New Yorkers can meaningfully engage in civic life. We are also committed to a social strategy that reflects the unparalleled diversity of New York City. As a legislative body of 51 district representatives, the Council is uniquely positioned to engage hyper-locally.

By creating guidelines and supportive internal processes for Council Members to use digital outreach, we will

simultaneously expand and deepen the ways we reach more and more diverse New Yorkers.

New Yorkers choose the communication tools and platforms that work best for them. By tracking and establishing consistent assessment of this use, we will be able to evaluate larger needs and trends across the City. This will help ensure that we are adopting and effectively using the right platforms.

### THEREFORE, WE WILL:

- **Establish Council-wide standards for sharing materials and gathering feedback for proposals and initiatives via established digital channels, such as Twitter and Facebook**
- **Continuously assess the Council's reach on platforms already in use, such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, in industry-standard metrics**
- **Experiment with emerging platforms, such as Meerkat, Weibo and Periscope, with a focus on expanding the ways we reach diverse communities**
- **Provide Council Members with the tools and support to explore interaction via social media during hearings**
- **Expand each district's online capacity through staff trainings, digital toolkits and messaging guides**





## POST THE COUNCIL'S BUSINESS ONLINE

**ACTION AND OUTCOMES:**  
**In 2015 the New York City Council will release more data sets so that civic technologists can work with them.**

Making it easier for the public to learn about the functions of the Council and access our legislative, budgetary and land use data is essential to building a vibrant civic dialogue.

Building on the success of the Open Data Law of 2012, the Council will “default to open,” meaning it will regularly evaluate what information can be released to the public and examine the best tools for relaying that information. We will conduct an overall technology review that examines all of the Council's data holdings, and ultimately create a timeline for

releasing new datasets. This includes an online searchable database of all land use items before the Council. In turn, civic technologists will have workable data that they can analyze, make policy recommendations or build tools that help the public interact with the Council. The goal is to create partnerships with the civic tech community that strengthen our ability to conduct oversight, promote efficiency, and foster broad engagement with municipal government.

To accomplish this, the Council will convene a cross-divisional working group that can support open government initiatives. It will use a small scale approach to test and evaluate projects, document best practices, and promote them throughout our 51 offices.

The Council will consider several new ways for increasing transparency and access to information online. We will begin with data focusing on the Council's chief duties: moving toward visualizing the budget, increasing access to the legislative process, and sharing city agency reports online.

## COUNCIL 2.0

# WE WANT TO WORK WITH YOU

### RESIDENTS

New Yorkers, your feedback is crucial. Tell us how we can use social, mobile or apps to help Council Members and constituents solve problems together in neighborhoods throughout our City.

### COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Digital inclusion means building tools that will help bring all communities to the table. We want to work with advocates and organizers who are dedicated to bridging diverse voices to government.

### TECHNOLOGISTS

Our city is home to some of the best civic-minded tech talent in the world. We want to hear your ideas and proposals for pilot projects.

#DigitalDialogue  
@NYCCouncil

### VISUALIZE THE BUDGET

The Council's Finance Division provides substantive analysis and thorough responses throughout the budgetary process. In order to ensure that these helpful documents are reaching the public, the Council will update the interface of the website to ensure that visitors can easily locate and navigate the archive of these reports.

Furthermore, the Council will examine ways to deliver budget information in formats and graphics that the public can easily navigate and understand. The Council will begin with datasets related to the city's expense and capital budget appropriations. In this way, New Yorkers will be able to see how the city budget affects their community.

### INCREASE ACCESS TO THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

As of this spring, voting and attendance records, hearing dates, and committee reports will be made more accessible via InSite, the Council's database of legislation and related proceedings. In addition, we are recommitting ourselves to improving the legislative data that we already post online. That means including more useful data and updating it more frequently.

However, simply putting data online is not enough — it should be made easy to find and to read. That is why

the Council is partnering with Granicus to provide an Application Programming Interface (API) that will be available in the coming months. Using the API, programmers will be able to develop applications that make it easier to use our database.

This information is essential to Council staffers, advocates, constituents, journalists, and other stakeholders who closely follow the business of the Council. Increasing usability will be a vital step toward the goals of open government and greater public transparency.

### SHARE CITY AGENCY REPORTS ONLINE

City agencies are required by law to submit to the Council certain reports relating to their activities. Among other things, such reports inform the Council's oversight work. For example, Local Law 24 of 2014 requires that the Department of Transportation report to the Council on the impact of slow zones on automobile crashes. Though they often contain important information that is of interest to the Council and the public, these reports can sometimes be difficult to locate and access.

Therefore, the Council will make certain reports of particular interest available to the public in a central online location. This tool will provide New Yorkers greater insight into the workings of their city agencies.

# BUILD CAPACITY AND CREATE PARTNERSHIPS

## **ACTION AND OUTCOMES:**

**To implement these initiatives, the Council will create new roles, tap current in-house expertise and develop partnerships across sectors.**

- Draw on internal staff expertise and resources
- Increase digital tech, knowledge and capacity of current staff through regular trainings
- Document, diffuse and promote best practices throughout the Council

## **CREATE PARTNERSHIPS**

There is a groundswell of civic innovation taking place in New York City. The Council is already collaborating with several civic technology leaders with plans to build on these efforts. We are excited to partner with Civic Hall, a membership organization committed to improving people's lives through technology and innovation. By tapping this growing network, we can bring



Photo: William Alatryste

Recent studies on how governments have used technology to strengthen public services and share data have often focused on mayoral administrations and not local legislative bodies. The New York City Council has an opportunity to break new ground and be a national model for City Councils across the nation.

To achieve this goal the Council must become more technologically agile, produce accurate data, and have the capacity to build and test new online tools.

### **THEREFORE, THE COUNCIL WILL:**

- **Build a Public Tech team to tackle the outlined initiatives. This will initially consist of:**
  - Social Media and Community Manager
  - Web/App Developer
  - Digital Content Producer
  - Open Data Analyst

the skills and creative problem solving from Civic Hall into City Hall.

We want to tap the energy and proven talent of civic techies to develop cost-effective solutions for government. To this end, the Council will host a civic hackathon in summer of 2015. Civic technologists who develop applications using datasets related to Council business will be encouraged to share those projects with the Council, and may be spotlighted on our website and social media feeds.

We will also exchange information with other cities that are committed to doing similar work and identify any possible opportunities for collaboration.

**Interested in collaborating with us?  
Please visit [Council.nyc.gov/digitalpartners](http://Council.nyc.gov/digitalpartners)  
to fill out a short questionnaire.**

## STUDYING PROGRESS AND SUCCESS

The Council's Working Group on Public Tech and Engagement will meet regularly to evaluate progress around the outlined objectives, discuss needs for sustaining pilots that gain traction, assist with an inventory of the Council's data holdings, and generate ideas for new tools for public access and participation.

In May, the Speaker will reconvene public tech experts to hear feedback about Council 2.0. The Public Tech Team will continuously monitor suggestions and comments from New Yorkers through, for example, social media and focus groups. Staff will also examine web and social media analytics to help study the type and substance of digital interaction.

Through roundtables, key stakeholders will be consulted on the progress of the Council's open data initiative, and on the types of datasets that best inform their work.

This roadmap sets the Council on a path to become a digitally-savvy institution that can easily adapt along with emerging technology. Our aim is to create a culture of iteration at the Council that consistently improves upon itself and makes government fully open and participatory. As this evolution takes place the roadmap may change but one thing will remain constant - New Yorkers will be better served.

## HOW WE GOT HERE

Spurred by a commitment to transparency, responsiveness, and inclusiveness, the Council sought to better meet the needs of diverse New Yorkers, be more open in its operations, and empower its Members to serve their individual districts. In May 2014, Members unanimously passed a package of reforms to amend its Rules, including a resolution to create a public technology plan that improves access to Council proceedings, materials and other data.

In the lead up to passing Rules Reform, the Council surveyed its Members and staff, consulted a range of stakeholders including local and national experts, and listened to hours of public testimony. What we found was an overwhelming interest in modernizing the Council website and implementing digital platforms to make our work more accessible to the public.

The Speaker then convened the internal Working Group on Public Tech and Engagement. This group met on a regular basis to explore innovation on how to better facilitate Open Data, engage more New Yorkers in the work of the Council, and identify future applications for digital tech to make government more accessible. [↻](#)

## WHO WE TALKED TO

**We consulted a range of stakeholders – from Members and staff, to local experts and organizations that serve a wide range of New Yorkers.**

### ● Internal surveys

We took into account a survey of members on rules reform. In that survey, there was overwhelming interest in having the Council website modernized. In June 2014, we distributed a survey to members with more specific questions on the use of technology to engage constituents and improve the Council.

### ● Testimony

At a hearing on Rules Reform earlier this year, good government and civic tech groups presented testimony with recommendations on the use and implementation of technology.

## WHO WE TALKED TO (CONTINUED)

### Working Group on Public Tech and Engagement

These cross division meetings have served as great brainstorm sessions on how to engage the under or unengaged, what does open data mean for the Council, and general challenges in using digital tech to make government accessible, participatory and transparent.

### Convening and consulting local experts

Last August, we convened diverse and local experts in areas such as civic technology and design, data analysis, engagement and content generation. This two-hour listening session yielded a long list of helpful suggestions, offers of support and interest in continuing the conversation.

#### PARTICIPANTS INCLUDED:

- Center for Urban Pedagogy
- PBNYC
- National Black Programming Consortium
- #BetaNYC
- Studio Rev
- Former Code for America fellows
- Center for Popular Democracy
- NYC Civic Engagement Table
- Rockaway Youth Task Force
- Center for Social Innovation

#### WE ALSO GATHERED INSIGHT FROM:

- The MIT Center for Civic Media
- Open Plans
- DOITT/Open Data
- Coalition for Queens
- Mozilla Hive Network
- New America Foundation's Open Technology Institute
- Senior Planet
- Make the Road NY
- SIMLab

### Research

#### WE REVIEWED A NUMBER OF HELPFUL REPORTS, STUDIES AND MODELS. SOME EXAMPLES:

- Recommendations from the Center for Popular Democracy on how the Council can use tech – commissioned by Council Member Dan Garodnick.
- *Bright Spots in Community Engagement*, a study of promising practices and models emerging from four U.S. cities.
- *Here us Now?* – A 2011 New America Foundation report that looked at how California municipalities are using technology.
- *The Social Media Experiment in Government: Elements of Excellence: GovLoop Guides, 2013 April 08.*
- Open Data Policy Guidelines: <http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/>
- Open by Default: <http://www.codeforamerica.org/governments/capabilities/open-data/>
- 8 Principles of Open Government Data: <http://opengovdata.org/>

## WHO WE TALKED TO (CONTINUED)

**We also looked at a number of apps to help us think about organization, priorities, management and sustainability.**

**Additionally, the Council sent a representative to the Code for America summit to learn more in depth about civic tech work in other cities.**

**WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU...**

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