



Last week, City Councilmember Gale Brewer sat down for a live on-line chat with Gotham Gazette and its readers as part of our “Measuring Up” series. The chair of the council’s technology committee, Brewer, who represents the Upper West Side, discussed how technology can help citizens learn more about their government and influence its action.

Gotham Gazette: A few years ago you proposed a bill, which passed, that requires the city to make data available from its 311 call center. Has this been successful? What has the data told us?

Gale Brewer: The 311 data is now available on the web. The current commissioner of information technology and telecommunications, Paul Cosgrave, has met regularly with community boards to discuss 311 data. We are hoping that the discussions will lead to real-time data available at the community boards. The 311 system needs the community boards and elected officials to help to solve the complicated issues. We become 311’s follow up!

Data to the People

by {ga=ggstaff}

Monday, May 07, 2007 12:00 AM

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Dick Dadey: What, in your opinion, has been the most successful technology project?

Gale Brewer: 311 would be a good candidate for watching government if the data was divided up to reflect neighborhood issues. As you know, we are working with the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunication to develop a system that allows community board staff to get the information in a form that can be manipulated and integrated with their data. Currently the data comes in a pdf form that is too hard to work with.

I also think that the Campaign Finance Board's website is a good government watcher, but the website of the Board of Elections is hard to navigate. The sites of the City Clerk, Campaign Finance Board, Board of Elections etc. need to be integrated.

Iphigene: What are some of the ways you think data collected by citizens or nongovernmental organizations can be effectively integrated into the city's efforts to track its progress? Could these kinds of partnerships work toward ensuring better city services or would it be too complicated? How could technology facilitate such collaborations?

Gale Brewer: A good question. The Fund for the City of New York has worked with community groups and block associations by giving residents hand-held computers that have a list of neighborhood issues, such as potholes, vacant lots, graffiti, vacant tree pits. etc. Residents walk their neighborhood and punch in data for the issues that need to be addressed. The list could be expanded and residents could do this on a regular basis.

In addition, with an expanded 311 system that can respond to residents and tell them if their problem is resolved (or not), the information on the handheld computers could be integrated into the 311 system. I have had the pleasure of using the handhelds, and I hope that all block associations could utilize them! I also hope that data could be collected by 311 via an email and not just by a phone call.

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Sara Stuart: How do you see technology and the internet facilitating greater citizens participation in zoning and planning issues in the next few years?

Gale Brewer: Great question! The Municipal Art Society has funding and staff who meet regularly with community boards to implement their 197-A planning efforts [to develop community based plans] by using GIS technology (computer mapping). I was a member of a community board for years. Having a map of a zoning project at a meeting makes for a much more informed discussion.

Gotham Gazette: You have been very involved in trying to bridge New York's digital divide, particularly in the area of broadband access. How can government reach people who for whatever reason are not on line?

Gale Brewer: In December 2005, I passed a law that mandated that the mayor and the City Council jointly appointed a Task Force on Broadband and how it could be used to close the digital divide. The law calls for hearings in all five boroughs. The Task Force had its first meeting in the Bronx, and the second is scheduled in Brooklyn on May 22, 2007, from noon to 2 p.m. at Brooklyn borough hall. All are welcome. (You can respond to gale.brewer@council.nyc.ny.us.)

We have learned (not surprisingly) that the cost of the current carriers (cable and telephone) is too high for many families, that the libraries are not open enough hours to provide books or use of computers, and that there is wireless access in schools (via e-rate), but students are really only able to access two hours a week of computer use. We need more competition, less expensive or free access to Internet, and we need to include Instant Messaging and other forms of communication in the discussion in order to bridge the digital divide. The city's economic development commission is also conducting a study of how New York City should implement a wireless system. We are behind the rest of the world in access to low cost, fast Internet or other

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technology for communication.

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Gotham Gazette: You have proposed a bill that would measure traffic congestion and set goals for reducing it. Everyone knows the city is crowded. Why is measuring congestion so essential to you plan?

Gale Brewer: The Department of Transportation already measures traffic flow throughout the city, including potholes. But with everyone talking about congestion being a major problem, the department does not collect information with a focus on reducing congestion. That doesn't make sense to me. The mayor is proposing congestion pricing as a solution, but we need to know the extent of the problem and where it is the worst.

Congestion plagues Manhattan, but there are traffic problems in all five boroughs. A comprehensive congestion study would allow the City to better strategically target its efforts. That is why I introduced Intro Number 199.

Gotham Gazette: How do the goals you set for reducing congestion fit in with the mayor's 2030 plan that includes congestion pricing, transit improvements and other congestion reducing measures?

Gale Brewer: If Intro 199 passes, some of the mandated information collected will be health statistics at busy intersections, type of vehicles on the road and alternative forms of transportation including pedestrians and bicyclists. All of this is not collected now. This piece of legislation will require the Department of Transportation to study these various forms of transportation and identify goals on how congestion can be reduced and transit improved throughout the city. The department would then be required to report to the mayor and City Council on a biannual basis with updates on how those goals are being met.

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The information collected would better inform the city's strategic plans for congestion pricing, transit improvements, etc. by pinpointing locations where fast and comfortable public transportation should exist before congestion pricing is implemented.

Ralph: You have advocated smart cards to improve bus transit times. Will you require that any smart card be anonymous to protect privacy and to avoid identity theft?

Gale Brewer: Yes, I will advocate that the cards be anonymous. The advantage to the cards is that they allow passengers to move on the bus faster than with Metrocards. However, the technology used in the pilot project on the East Side of Manhattan has had challenges and is not ready for wider implementation.

It is our understanding that there may be security issues. Also only Citibank cards can be used on the current system. I assume that other cards will be used once the challenges are worked out.

Sydney: How does New York compare with other cities in its use of technology to monitor government and are there any particular models or programs elsewhere that you are interested in implementing or borrowing from?

Gale Brewer: That would be a good question for an oversight hearing! We can ask representatives of states that have passed Clean Money Clean Elections laws to testify.

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