NEW AMERICA
FOUNDATION

June 25, 2013

PUBLIC ETHICS COMMISSION TESTIMONY
Re: Transparency Hearing

Alissa Black – Director, CA Civic Innovation Project

Whitney Barazoto, and other distinguished members of the Public Ethics Commission I want to thank you for the opportunity to participate in the transparency hearing through my written testimony.

Over the course of my work in the civic engagement and tech field it has become increasingly obvious to me that government transparency -- through providing access to understandable and meaningful information and data -- has the power to change the relationship between residents and government.

Ultimately, tools will change and pathways into government will be appear and disappear but the sustainable and most adaptive part of our communities are the residents. And so ensuring their voices are heard and included in public decision making, to me, is the most important challenge facing our cities today.

Building trust with residents through transparency can lead to engagement, and it can lead to productive and valuable engagement. I hope the hearing today sheds light on what's working in Oakland and where the city should dedicate time and resources.

As the Director of the CA Civic Innovation Project, and through my past work with Code for America, I've had the pleasure of working with numerous cities on civic technology and engagement projects. I think it will be helpful for me to provide you with a few inspiring examples of innovation within government to give some real context to this notion of transparency leading to engagement.

- *Participatory Budgeting*
  Participatory Budgeting (PB) is a democratic process that was first developed in Brazil in 1989 and is now practiced in over 1,500 cities around the world. In these cities, PB lets community members decide how to spend part of a municipal budget. The PB the process generally involves several months of public meetings, discussions, and voting, so that the public has time to make informed decisions.

  In 2012, the Vallejo City Council established the first city-wide Participatory Budgeting process in the United States. Through PB, the community was invited to help decide how to spend $3.2 million. Vallejo residents and stakeholders developed project proposals, almost 4,000 residents ages 16 and older voted on projects, and twelve projects that received the most votes was submitted to City Council for approval.

The Steering Committee for the PB Vallejo project identified three main goals. These goals highlight the ways in which the PB process is used to move transparency into engagement. The goals are:

1. Improve our city
We aim to enhance quality of life In Vallejo by developing projects that solve real problems and create strong and healthy communities. We hope that this process will build a new spirit of civic pride and raise the profile of Vallejo on the regional, state, and national levels.

2. Engage our community
We aim to ensure that all members of our community have a voice. We will make every effort to engage those who are traditionally underrepresented in politics, who face obstacles to participating, or who feel disillusioned with the political process. Through widespread and meaningful community engagement, we hope to increase public involvement in civic life in Vallejo. To the extent applicable, public meetings will comply with the open meeting requirements of the Ralph M. Brown Act.

3. Transform our democracy
We aim to empower Vallejo residents and stakeholders with the skills and knowledge they need to shape our city's future. By enabling people to make real decisions-, we will build new leadership from the bottom up and forge deeper ties between residents, neighborhoods, and communities.

The participatory budgeting (PB) project in Vallejo, CA, is an inspiring example of when transparency and engagement amplify one another.

One of the experiment's most interesting findings was that participants that were informed were more engaged. We found that those residents that knew about the city's budget and how the city spends money were more likely to have recently voted in a local election and to have work with others in their community to solve community problems.

- *NextDoor*
The City of San Jose's partnership with NextDoor, a private social network for neighborhoods, illustrates the civic innovation ecosystem that involves government, technologists and residents working toward a long-term structural change in how residents and government co-govern. The City of San Jose partnered with NextDoor to awaken neighborhood capacity across the city to take action, share resources and gifts, and address their own problems. The collection of micro-networks that make up NextDoor responds to a problem of scale, and invites both community cohesiveness and a new approach to policy-making.

The longer-term goal is for the City of San Jose to shift from treating residents like customers where city services are the answers to all their problems, to respecting them as citizens, who have the responsibility to be a part of the solution. For example, the City is not a central part of the NextDoor network, rather they act as one player in the system, requiring residents to solve their problems and create solutions, not rely solely on the City to respond to requests or complaints.

- *Open311*
  While working for the City & County of San Francisco I led the Open311 project that created a way for residents to read/write government. Open311 is an application programming interface (API) that essentially acts as a bridge between government data and the public. You can think of an API as the tool that allows developers to easily receive and send data to and from government – making government data not only available, but also accessible.

  The API is currently used by software developers, in collaboration with government, in hundreds of cities across the country. By making government data accessible, via Open311, residents were able to access government in new ways. Tools like SeeClickFix and other service reporting apps use the Open311 API to make information and data meaningful to the public. It's important that tools that only provide transactional relationships between residents and government not be dismissed because they are critical in developing civic muscle, which can lead to longer-term and deeper engagement.

Innovation, transparency and engagement are each spectrums, and every city, based on resources, priorities and community, are at various points along those spectrums. The City of Oakland has made tremendous progress over the past several years; this hearing is evidence of that. As an Oakland resident and civic techie/ wonk I'm excited for the future of Oakland as Commissions like yours make progress in bringing the city further along the spectrum of innovation and pursue projects that provide opportunities for the public to be a part of public decision making processes.

Sincerely,

Alissa Black
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