



# TECHNOLOGY FOR A JUST RECOVERY

*a plan by*

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for NYC Comptroller

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# TECHNOLOGY

## FOR A JUST RECOVERY

### INTRODUCTION

Technology holds the potential to provide opportunities for all New Yorkers, support more effective local government, and rebuild a thriving economy in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. For the tech sector to play that role, we must address critical issues of equity, access and inclusion, of democracy given the power of growing monopolies, and of the risks that our information age poses to civil liberties and racial justice.

As NYC Comptroller, Brad is committed to strengthening the tech sector in New York City, addressing issues of inequity in access to and use of technology, improving the functioning of the city's government through civic technology and open data, and to working with the technology sector to foster a dynamic, diverse, and more sustainable future (especially in the face of the climate crisis and growing inequality).

The COVID-19 crisis has sharpened the consequences of the digital divide, as functioning, affordable internet and working devices have become essential to accessing education, health care, and justice. Our collective failure to integrate accessible, affordable technology into New Yorkers' lives will only worsen socioeconomic and racial inequality in our city. Accelerating the development of municipal broadband, treating the internet as a public utility, and auditing the outreach efforts of agencies to ensure that access to the internet is not a precondition of receiving services or participating in democracy will be essential to a just and equitable recovery.

**Brad has a plan to bridge the digital divide, make government more effective and transparent, guard against discrimination and abuses of privacy, and strengthen NYC's tech sector to support a just economic recovery.**

### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **STRENGTHEN NYC'S TECH SECTOR AND CLOSE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE, TO SUPPORT A JUST ECONOMIC RECOVERY FOR ALL NEW YORKERS.**

New York City's tech sector is a global tech hub that employs over 300,000 people (more tech jobs than the Bay Area) and is one of the fastest growing sectors of the city's economy. More than 85% of tech companies said they planned to hire new talent in 2020 (prior to the COVID-19 crisis) and many have continued to invest in NYC despite the economic crisis. The sector brings with it immense economic opportunity for New Yorkers, diversifying our economy to reduce our dependence on Wall Street and real estate while creating high-quality job opportunities for our City's diverse workforce. But the tech sector, like most every other industry, has been hit hard by the COVID-19 crisis and will need significant support in order to recover, let alone grow. And it will take creative new approaches to enable it to do so in ways that will support a just and inclusive economic future for our City -- to create opportunities for all New Yorkers, help stabilize our local economy in the long-term, and build a city that works better for everyone.

- **Accelerate the implementation of the Internet Master Plan and work to create and expand municipal broadband access for all:**

More than 1.5 million New Yorkers, nearly one third of households, still lack access to high speed at home or mobile internet, a utility as important as electricity for modern life. We must deliver affordable, reliable, accessible, private internet access for all New Yorkers.

In January 2020, the City released a long-awaited "Internet Master Plan" that calls for universal broadband throughout the five boroughs, relying on open-access fiber networks that can be used by multiple ISPs, that plans to utilize the City's real estate



assets and public rights-of-way (poles, streets, City-owned buildings, etc). The City will prioritize and optimize 'open-access' or 'neutral-host infrastructure' to lower cost and expand access. As Comptroller, Brad will work with City agencies to accelerate implementation of the Internet Master Plan by requiring increased competition between ISPs for access to open wireless infrastructure, enforcing promises in existing franchise agreements, and making the financial case for the city capital investment needed to achieve universal broadband. Brad will also work with city agencies to ensure enforcement of the settlement agreement with Verizon to expand FiOS infrastructure to more than 500,000 residents, including all NYCHA residents.

In addition to holding the city and private companies accountable for fulfilling the commitments of the Internet Master Plan, Brad will explore ways to finance and rollout a "public option" for municipal broadband. In addition to filling in gaps in service where private-sector companies have failed to provide accessible and affordable options, creating a public utility provider for internet would better protect net neutrality principles and protect data privacy without the profit incentive for companies, whose ability to sell consumer data for profit was unleashed by the Trump administration's FCC.

While the priority should be affordable, accessible, speedy internet connectivity, the Comptroller's office will also assess access to internet computing devices, particularly of students. It is unacceptable that during months of remote learning tens of thousands of New York City students still do not have either a device or access to the internet.

- **Grants/RFPs targeted at tech-focused MWBEs and start ups to help give them a leg up on securing city contracts to develop their expertise and compete with major companies.**

As Comptroller, Brad will explore new ways to invest our City's pension funds into NYC-based M/WBE start-ups, entrepreneurs and small businesses, particularly in neighborhoods where there are significant barriers to accessing start-up funds.

Brad will aggressively pursue policies that increase access to contracting opportunities for women- and minority-owned businesses, and make sure that all New Yorkers have an equitable chance to earn business from the City's multi-billion dollar procurement budget. He will preserve and work to strengthen the Comptroller's offices M/WBE

initiatives, including the City agency grading and progress report, M/WBE university. Read more about Brad's plans to support New York City's M/WBE businesses [here](#).

- **Public investment in tech education and workforce development at all educational levels to create pathways of opportunity for all New Yorkers.**

As our City grapples with the highest rates of unemployment seen since the Great Depression, the technology sector offers opportunities for new jobs and economic opportunity for young New Yorkers. To ensure those jobs go to local residents, especially low-income communities of color, we must invest in technology education to create a more diverse generation of New Yorkers excited and equipped to enter our City's vibrant tech sector. A public-school student from NYC should be able to graduate college without crushing debt and compete for engineering jobs at any tech firm in the city. This will require investing in our educational systems and supporting programs that create enhanced accessibility.

As Comptroller, Brad will advocate for investment in K-12 programs to foster computational thinking and digital skills, advocate for more STEM opportunities for Summer Youth Employment Program participants, and pursue partnerships and funding opportunities for workforce development programs to help equip the next generation of New Yorkers with the skills needed to compete in the industry. CUNY is the best engine of upward social mobility and opportunity that we have, and is the best site to train and develop the skills needed to pursue career pathways to the middle class in the technology sector. Brad will explore the idea of instituting a PILOT on private institutions in New York City, like Columbia and New York University, to help pay for a free CUNY.

- **Encourage the tech sector to prioritize diversity and equity in its workforce.**

Brad will work with the Mayor and City Council to encourage tech companies to prioritize diversity and equity through apprenticeship programs, local hire requirements, partnerships with CUNY career offices, and expanding internship and mentorship programs in partnership with local public schools, colleges, and community-based organizations. Brad will advocate for increased funding for paid internship and apprenticeship opportunities in the tech sector, expanding the STEM-related jobs available to Summer Youth Employment Program participants

and expanding the CSA4ALL internship program.

There is also significant opportunity for the Comptroller's office to play a role in supporting tech workers organizing for better jobs, including advocating as an institutional investor for increased diversity in company boardrooms, enforcing living wage laws, and using the bully pulpit to highlight particularly bad actor employers.

- **Invest in digital access and digital literacy programming supported by public institutions.**

There is significant room for growth in the city's public programs to expand digital skills, including expanding the Computer Science for All NYC program in K-12 schools, the Tech Talent Pipeline and increasing the number of STEM-related jobs available through the Summer Youth Employment Program. The city's three public library systems, in addition to many of our City's parks, senior centers, and recreational centers, have done enormous work to expand internet access for New Yorkers without it, building tech hubs, teaching members how to use software, and providing kids with a place to do their homework after school. Brad will advocate for the funding needed to expand these programs with a focus on K-12 programs that provide an early platform for digital confidence to bring more young women and people of color into the tech industry.

## **MAKE GOVERNMENT WORK BETTER THROUGH THE USE OF OPEN DATA AND CIVIC TECHNOLOGY TO STRENGTHEN ACCOUNTABILITY AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT**

With New York City's set to receive billions in federal aid and trust in government's ability to deliver on its promises at historically low levels, we must use every tool at our disposal to spend money wisely to make NYC work better and more fairly. New York City has been a leader when it comes to collecting and publishing open data that civic technologists and policy makers can use to improve our city. But our local leaders have only begun to effectively use that data in ways that will improve the delivery of services, reduce costs, and foster collaboration between City agencies while paying close attention to issues of privacy and surveillance.

Brad has long-championed the use of public data and partnerships with the civic tech community to achieve shared policy goals. In the case of safe streets, Brad's Reckless Driver Accountability Act takes an innovative, data-driven, and restorative approach to reducing dangerous driving and saving lives. As

Comptroller, Brad will continue to champion data-driven policy and governance to enhance the city's financial well-being, improve budget transparency, and publish thorough machine-readable data that civic technologists can use to improve our city.

- **Use data to improve efficiency, root out waste in contracts, and streamline processes.**

During his time in the City Council, Brad has repeatedly used public data to expose inefficiencies and injustices in City government and led campaigns to fix them. His hard-hitting reports on schools, housing, traffic safety, infrastructure and capital projects have won tangible results, from bringing air conditioning to all NYC classrooms, to creating the city's first comprehensive tracking of capital projects to get a handle on delays and overspending, to restructuring the school crossing guard division to reduce inefficiency and improve safety.

Brad will take the same lens to the job of the NYC Comptroller, using sharp, honest, data-driven, and transparent audits, to root out waste, fraud, and abuse, target programs that aren't meeting our goals, and show what's needed to fix them. In addition to strengthening the data analytics team in the Comptroller's office, he will work closely with the civic tech community to help analyze a far broader range of the City's open data than the office could get to alone (and consider establishing prizes and rewards, as appropriate, for civic technologists who identify problems that lead to savings and improvements). Read more about his plans to improve and expand the Comptroller's audit bureau.

City agencies often rely too heavily on costly consultants to deliver high-quality tech services and build the robust internal systems needed to improve our City's operations. Brad will also advocate for building out the internal tech workforce and infrastructure in city agencies to ensure the City doesn't need to rely solely on these external contracts to keep up with the times.

- **Closing the digital divide, expanding digital literacy, and improving digital accessibility of city information and services.**

Throughout the pandemic, a New Yorker without a working computer and a solid internet connection hasn't been able to go to school, speak to a medical professional, or attend religious services. The "digital divide" will keep growing unless the City takes decisive action.

New Yorkers need access to low-cost, powerful, and reliable broadband internet in their homes. Students need computers they can work on away from school. And the city needs to continue to support and expand programs that provide free internet, computer access, and digital literacy support. City agencies must improve access to information and services through improvements to web design, portals, and digital outreach.

- **Support digital accessibility and disability justice through audits of city services.**

The COVID-19 crisis has also shown us first-hand how accessible, inclusive technology can uniquely meet the needs of New Yorkers with disabilities, who are too often ignored and sidelined by our economy on the whole and our City's infrastructure and delivery of services. For example, for decades, students and workers with disabilities have been fighting for the right to work remotely--only now are we beginning to understand the inherent benefits that this flexibility can bring to our society and economy to create a more inclusive City.

Brad will work with disability justice advocates to establish digital accessibility standards for city services and digital platforms and integrate those standards into evaluations of agency performance. He will conduct digital accessibility audits of city agencies to evaluate ease of accessing information, applying for services, and participating in public meetings for people who are mobility or visually impaired, ensuring that best practices for screen readers, font-size and contrast, and closed-captioning are utilized by city agencies.

- **Create new opportunities for public engagement.**

Improving participation in local democracy is at the core of Brad's priorities for a stronger, more democratic NYC. Brad helped bring participatory budgeting to New York City, creating new easy for residents to participate in the process of collective decision-making about how best to invest public funds in our communities. Brad will bring the same spirit to the office of the Comptroller, including everyday New Yorkers in the process of evaluating how the City serves its people through innovative participatory auditing. New Yorkers are the consumers of all of our City's critical services — from sanitation, to transportation, to education. In partnership with civil technologists, Brad will develop new platforms for civic engagement to include New Yorkers in

evaluating the services provided by the City. He will conduct a resident feedback survey to gauge NYC residents satisfaction with municipal services and the quality-of-life in their neighborhoods and engage stakeholders and community members in evaluating how well or poorly the city is providing needed services.

Brad has also proposed developing an interactive public dashboard to track the city's progress on city and statewide climate goals. This ongoing and visible tracker of everything from CO2 levels to open space will invite New Yorkers to help oversee and participate in achieving our climate goals while putting pressure on the city where it's needed most. Using cutting edge digital organizing tools, Brad will create ladders of engagement to involve everyday New Yorkers in campaigns to pressure companies to do right by the environment and ensure that the city meets its sustainability goals.

- **Working with the Public Advocate, reinvigorate the Commission on Public Information and Communication as a tool for ensuring transparency and public engagement.**

The neglected Commission on Public Information and Communication, tasked with developing strategies for how communications technologies can improve access to city data, has not lived up to its potential as a tool for increasing access to information or improving communication to the public. Brad will work in partnership with Public Advocate Jumaane Williams, who chairs the Commission, to staff up COPIC and put the Commission to work reviewing city data privacy practices, holding public hearings on improving Open Data and access to public information, and evaluating current public engagement platforms and opportunities for improvement.

## **ADDRESS THE THREATS TO DEMOCRACY, CIVIL LIBERTIES AND EQUITY POSED BY TECHNOLOGY COMPANIES AND GOVERNMENT USE OF DATA AND SURVEILLANCE**

Technology and data-driven policy are powerful tools to expand opportunity and increase government efficiency, but we cannot lose sight of the many risks to democracy and equity that come along data-based decision-making, surveillance, and the consolidation of information and power by private companies.

We already know that big data algorithms presented as unbiased, objective tools very often reinforce pre-

existing inequalities and can be rife with biased underlying assumptions that lead to racist outcomes. And that the surveillance of communities of color in the name of “public safety” or efficiency can often be used as tools for discrimination and the violation of New Yorkers’ civil liberties. That’s why at the Council, Brad was a strong supporter of the POST Act and strongly opposed exempting NYPD from algorithm oversight. As Comptroller, Brad will work to expose and challenge discriminatory technology, hold City agencies to high standards for data privacy and retention practices, and utilize the city’s role as a shareholder to put pressure on private corporations to do the same.

- **Audit algorithms used by City agencies for bias in everything from predictive policing to school admissions.**

Strengthen the work of the Algorithms Management and Privacy Officer and Chief Privacy Officer with equity audits that focus on the use of algorithms by city agencies, following recommendations laid out in the shadow report released by advocacy organizations parallel to the ADS taskforce process. Despite the creation of this new role (which has yet to be filled), there is little to no transparency or accountability still over the algorithms used by city agencies to make decisions affecting the lives of New Yorkers. The office’s audits team has the power and the responsibility to shed light on and evaluate the inputs and weighting of algorithms used to determine everything from school seat assignments, police presence in particular neighborhoods, bail and sentencing decisions, and filling vacancies in public housing, with the goal of rooting out racial, economic, and geographic bias.

- **Audit city agencies and contractors to ensure compliance with data privacy best practices to safeguard the information and rights of New Yorkers.**

City agencies providing services to New Yorkers collect and store an immense amount of data about the personal and private lives of residents, especially low-income residents of color who have more interaction with agencies for services. As Comptroller, Brad will deploy data privacy audits to determine which agencies do the best job of protecting the data of New Yorkers and advocate for privacy and retention standards to protect that data. He will utilize available data to conduct a comprehensive review of NYC surveillance and data collection practices, from LinkNYC kiosks to speed cameras, to identify areas of

intervention to curb discriminatory uses of data and threats to civil liberties. Brad will also advocate for the integration of privacy and anti-discrimination standards around data collection and retention into the city’s process for selecting and contracting with outside vendors.

- **As fiduciary of the City pension funds, join efforts to hold technology companies accountable for practices that infringe on democracy and civil liberties.**

New York City can play a productive role as a major institutional investor in joining national campaigns to put public pressure on technology companies to put strict limits on data collection and retention, support efforts to combat misinformation especially in our elections, and prevent discrimination in advertising for jobs and housing. By partnering with labor, civil rights, and anti-trust stakeholders, the NYC Comptroller can play a meaningful role in putting pressure on bad actor companies. For example, Brad will work with the Athena coalition stakeholders to identify areas of intervention through public pressure and shareholder activism to demand better labor conditions and increased market competition from Amazon, the internet marketplace with monopoly power.

## CONCLUSION

In order to support a just economic recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, Brad will use the tools of the Comptroller’s office to support investments in broadband infrastructure to help bridge the digital divide, strengthen public engagement and accountability, and develop a diverse talent pipeline to help the technology sector play a critical role in rebuilding a creative and sustainable economy that creates opportunities for all New Yorkers.