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Commissioner
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April 17, 2018

Dear Acting Counsel Rodriguez, Commissioner Saini, and City Clerk McSweeney:

The City in February modernized its lobbying activity database, which importantly reveals more lobbying activity than its predecessor. The new database is an improvement over the previous version, but we believe significant changes should be made to fulfill its goal of making lobbying activity more transparent.

We write to you to make recommendations for policy and functional improvements to the new lobbying database which went live in February 2018.

Mayor de Blasio also stated in his February 14th State of the City address that, "starting March 1st, New York will be the only city in the country requiring that all commissioners and all people who report directly to the mayor disclose every time they have a meeting with a lobbyist." We do not believe this database has been created yet, but think it should be integrated in the City Clerk database so that the public can view all lobbying activity in one place.

Below are our recommendations for making the City Clerk's lobbying database more useful to the public.

- Place the underlying data in the city's Open Data portal in compliance with Local Law 11 of 2012, the Open Data Law;
- Make the entire database, and particular search results, downloadable in a machine readable format;
- Improve the search function by:
  - providing an explanation for how to use the search function or how to refine a search. This is standard information provided for search engines.
  - using a boolean search to enable a more refined search using keywords in combination with modifiers like AND, OR, NOT or putting a search term in quotes to do a search for the entire term. The search function does not offer boolean search techniques.
  - enabling users to search exclusively for an individual by first and last name. The database currently does not allow for this, making search results much lengthier and producing results that are not the actual search term sought. A search for "Mayor de Blasio" returns all the offices with the word "Mayor" in it, making it difficult to determine who actually lobbied the mayor himself. A search for mayoral staffer Jon Paul Lupo, for example, provides all results with the word "Jon", "Paul", or "Lupo" rather than searching for the entire name.
  - making search terms immediately visible in search results when searching for a bill number or target lobbied. A search for a bill number, for example, shows the lobbyist or client filing containing the bill number. The user must click on "view details" for each filing listed in the search results to actually see the bill number searched for. The same is true when searching for a Councilmember or staff of Councilmembers.
- Define all the terms in the search column and the top row of the search results through a mouseover or link to a separate data dictionary. For example, define "lobbying target", "client principal officer", "subject detail" and "entity." The general public may not know what these terms mean or how they are related to each other.
- Clarify that the user can't type in the box under the Lobbying Target search option, and must click on the lobbying target button to select lobbying targets, which appear in the box after they are selected by the user.
- Move the Submit and Reset buttons further down the page from the Lobbying Target search option. It looks as if these buttons are part of the Lobbying Target option, which they are not, rather than linked to the search as a whole.
- Allow for selecting a page number among the search results. Currently, a user must scroll through all the search results to get to a particular page.

- Include a button to get to the bottom of the search results quickly. A button is already provided to reach the top of the search results.
- Include lobbying activity from before 2013 if possible.

We welcome a meeting to discuss our recommendations with you. Please contact Alex Camarda, Senior Policy Advisor at Reinvent Albany at alex@reinventalbany.org should you be interested in meeting with our groups.

Regards,

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