POLITICONEW YORK *beta*

POLITICO New York ▶

SECTIONS ▶ PRO ▶

City tech approach gets mixed grades two years in

De Blasio at the NY Tech Meetup in 2014, announcing the appointment of Minerva Tantoco as the City's first ever Chief Technology Officer. (Rob Bennett/Mayoral Photography Office)

By **MIRANDA NEUBAUER**   5:17 a.m. | Mar. 11, 2016

FOLLOW THIS REPORTER

When Mayor Bill de Blasio appointed Minerva Tantoco to be the city's chief technology officer in the fall of 2014, he said her goal would be to "develop and implement a coordinated strategy for technology and innovation, for how this city as a whole is going to approach the role of technology in our everyday lives, in our economy, in our schools, in our civic participation."

In her first remarks in front of the NY Tech Meet-Up, she stated that "our goal is to make New York City the most tech and innovation-friendly city in the world."

One and half-years later, technologists and advocates with experience both inside and outside government see many signs of realizing that vision, but also feel a sense of frustration as they wait for the administration to explicitly outline a strategy to tie its efforts together and distinguish itself from the Bloomberg administration. In particular, they point to the lack of a roadmap that could signify a commitment to a broader city technology overhaul, and from the from the civic technology advocacy side, feel a lack of input opportunities.

De Blasio's State of the City address this year included three announcements related to technology: the roll-out of a citywide pay-by-phone metered parking system, the LinkNYC payphone wi-fi project and the expansion of a free broadband project for NYCHA developments. Both the first two were realizations of ideas born in the Bloomberg administration, which first released the bid invitation for what became a "no-cost innovation project" with Parkmobile announced in February and launched the Reinvent Payphones effort that led to the LinkNYC project.

MORE ON POLITICO

▪ Chief medical examiner pressed on

In the run-up to the 2013 mayoral election, civic technology group BetaNYC had authored the

MOST POPULAR

1	An elective trauma for Douglas Durst
2	Council reaches deal on de Blasio's housing plans
3	Racism leads to disparate health outcomes, NYC health chief says
4	City Council announces deal on mayor's controversial zoning plans
5	City Council zeroing in on final housing deal to increase affordability

turnaround times

- NYCHA has been cooperating with federal inquiry for months
- State senator calls on CUNY to suspend pro-Palestinian group

"The People's Roadmap to a Digital New York City."

Since then, one main accomplishment is the online relaunch of the City Record, which the administration implemented in conjunction with the passage of a law and input from the civic technology group BetaNYC, though the group still sees a long way to go toward its full potential.

But other elements of the plan have not found a place in the administration's agenda, leaving outside groups to fill the gap, according to Noel Hidalgo, executive director of BetaNYC.

A proposal for a petitioning platform along the lines of the White House's We the People platform faced dismissal by the administration at a Council hearing in the fall of 2014 in favor of one-on-one "direct digital engagement." While the administration has embraced social media outreach, third-party groups from the Participatory Politics Foundation to Change.org still fill the void of facilitating policy or legislative feedback.

Code Corps, a volunteer tech response team announced by then-Mayor Michael Bloomberg his 2013 State of the City Address to help respond to disasters after Hurricane Sandy, has received no mention on the city's website since. BetaNYC now sees its Civic Innovation Fellows initiative that it is organizing along with Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer and the CUNY Service Corps as its heir, with the goal of bringing civic technology skills to community boards.

On the surface, one of BetaNYC's larger priorities appears to have been met: "to evolve NYC Digital and empower the Chief Digital Officer," with Tantoco heading up the newly created Mayor's Office of Technology and Innovation. In making the new technology office, de Blasio reimagined and gave new prominence to responsibilities that under Bloomberg had been the focus of Chief Digital Officer Rachal Haot, now also formerly of the Cuomo administration.

Tantoco joined Jessica Singleton, originally digital director in the mayor's office and now in the reinvented chief digital officer position, with a focus on online engagement, and Anne Roest, the commissioner of the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications.

The enhanced position of technology within the city's leadership, even after the delayed execution, raised expectations among civic technology and open-government advocates. But a year later, Hidalgo says he often mainly sees "promotions" of programs originating in the Bloomberg administration, and expressed concern about the lack of a detailed plan from MOTI for what happens next, compared with existing strategy documents published by DoITT and the Mayor's Office of Data Analytics.

Under Haot, the administration produced lengthy and updated digital roadmaps beginning in 2011.

In a 2016 New Year's message sent to members of the technology community, Tantoco writes that an "overview of the citywide technology strategy was completed in October 2015, weaving together key drivers, principles and initiatives tied to the Mayor's tech agenda."

The summary still hasn't been made public by the city.

Pointing to the website overview of the MOTI staff on its website, "for a staff of 11 people," Hidalgo said, it was difficult to tell what they had learned from feedback in the past year.

As a fellow at the Data and Society Research Institute with significant skepticism toward the idea of mass data collection, Hidalgo also expressed wariness at the emphasis that MOTI is placing on "smart city" projects. MOTI outlined its vision for neighborhood innnovation labs and smart city technology pilots starting this year in partnership with among others the N.Y.U. Center for Urban Science and Progress and the Economic Development Corporation in a document submitted to the national Envision America initiative.

Echoing some of those views from within is Bob Richardson, who worked in city technology during both the Bloomberg and de Blasio administrations in the Mayor's Office, at DoITT, as well most recently the Technology Development Corporation until August 2015. In between, he worked for Control Group, one of the original firms behind the payphone wi-fi effort, and now is a consultant to a private equity firm working on business, technology, and data strategy for a large-scale real estate development project.

"The two years of the de Blasio administration has been marked by having to do two things at once with regard to technology," he said in a recent interview. "One: in many respects continue the legacy of the Bloomberg administration, but not having to necessarily say that's what they're doing, and at the same time try to define the way in which technology would be a uniquely enabling factor for the agenda for de Blasio to have."

He suggested that the nature of the administration's pressing demands has meant less of an elevation of technology than there could have been. While he said the administration had made "small, but significant" efforts in the areas of smart cities, data security and cloud computing, he argued that the city's older technology workforce tended to lead to continued engagement of established, expensive, less flexible technology vendors.

"I think that for the most part the highest reaches of the administration still don't really understand what potentially transformative power technology has for changing the very service design of government," he said. The city, he said, had yet to figure out "how to really build a technology workforce that would be able to not only adopt these new technologies but even iterate on them."

When he reentered government, he said, he had hoped to help shape the citywide strategy.

"I saw pieces of it coming together but with no clear investment in the people necessary to make these things [have some level of] coherence and be executable," he said.

"The city continues to need a single leader who oversees both technology development and technology operations and is … able to make call when there is the classic conflict between risk-savvy innovation and risk-averse continuity," he said. "The CTO [Tantoco] has part of the mandate, but [Roest] has part of the mandate, and so the organization isn't there."

Richardson said that he was not aware of his ideal vision being in place in any city government, and suggested it may only emerge in somewhat smaller cities such as

Boston or Louisville with fewer competing demands for an administration's urgent attention. He invoked as an ideal the British Government Digital Service, which in turn has inspired federal efforts like the U.S. Digital Service and the digital services agency known as 18F .

There have been indications of technology-focused hiring outreach by the city, with a tech-jobs focused career portal launched in the fall. The portal recently listed nine jobs in development, mainly at DoITT and City Planning and 14 analytics positions, including significant positions at the Buildings Department, among others.

Richardson suggested a deputy mayor role focused on integrating technology into the administration's broader efforts.

"Maybe the CTO is the appropriate role through which that happens, but the role has not been empowered to that degree, in my opinion," he said.

He saw potential for Technology Development Corporation, the nonprofit corporation set up in 2012 under Bloomberg to oversee major technology projects, where he last worked, to evolve into something like the federal government's 18F. Its website documents credit the agency with key involvement in the Pre-K for All outreach system and IDNYC.

He said, he felt however, that nobody "understand[s] the potential value of the TDC well enough."

Councilwoman Helen Rosenthal invoked a possible role for the Technology Development Corporation at a recent Council hearing considering two bills introduced by Councilman Ben Kallos aimed at pushing the administration to embrace open-source software, which the Independent Budget Office estimates could eventually save $25 million. An 18F employee was among those testifying in favor.

The administration indicated that it shared Kallos' goal, but faced questions from council members and advocates about its efforts to establish an overview of city software in use as a necessary starting point.

In an interview, Kallos, who has praised the administration's technology leadership team, had said that "the mayor [is] incredibly empowered to give a directive [to] ensure that when the city is acquiring software that that software is code that is owned by the city of New York."

Tantoco has said she anticipates more smaller prototype programs, and the city engaged the firm CityMart to rethink traditional procurement approaches.

Comptroller Scott Stringer has also worked to transition several procurement-related processes related to W9-forms and vendor notifications to online systems.

At a Big Apps event last summer, Rick Fromberg, the mayor's senior adviser for public engagement, described some days as being "constantly in a fight to bring [together] … right ways to use data and technology for our own purposes," he said. Fromberg was also senior adviser on the Pre-K for all effort, which has received praise for its integration of data, unconventional outreach to technology companies, made possible by the work of the Mayor's Office of Data Analytics.

MODA is also one of the lead entities overseeing the open data program, and advocates have said that the city needs more open-data staff to ensure the success of recently

passed open data law mandates, as the good government group Reinvent Albany reiterated at a recent BetaNYC event.

According to the 2016 financial plan, MODA is getting new funding for a consultant and six additional positions.

In early 2014, Nick O'Brien, then representing MODA, testified to Council technology committee chair James Vacca that it was staffed for eight positions, which Vacca said was insufficient.

O'Brien, who served in the Bloomberg administration under first Chief Analytics Officer Mike Flowers and then as director of public affairs under the new administration, recently left to take a position as director of data insights at SiteCompli, a real estate compliance monitoring company.

"In the Bloomberg administration they weren't trying to create an integrated team," Richardson said, but were "trying to draw together the insights of a disparate group of people [to] push forward a kind of vision."

He said the de Blasio team hadn't yet managed to realize its own vision of a more technology-focused team, "and so we haven't heard a whole lot about technology in the de Blasio administration."

The industry group the New York Technology Council had outlined its priorities to de Blasio after his election, including to "actively promote" the city as a center for technology innovation.

"He has not done that to the extent that we hoped he would," said Erik Grimmelmann, its president and CEO.

He said there had been more progress on other issues, but that it was too early to judge.

"The real test is where are we ten years from now," he said.

He called the need to develop a cohesive policy around regulation of the sharing economy while embracing innovation a key priority.

"It's got to be more than just how do we deal with one particular company or one particular model," he said.

Signaling an intent to take more control of large technology projects, at the end of 2014 de Blasio issued an executive order reestablishing a Technology Steering Committee consisting of the CTO as the chair, along with the first deputy mayor, the commissioner of DoITT and the director of the Office of Management and Budget.

Last fall, Vacca introduced a bill last fall requiring periodic reports on the committee and the citywide policies and contracts it may have reviewed. Rosenthal, who had also referred to the steering committee at the recent Council hearing, is a co-sponsor.

"I don't think they're very transparent at all," she said recently, citing community concerns last year about an initially $1.1 billion Department of Education contract.

"I'm very interested in knowing how often they meet, what triggers a review," she said, noting that the DOE contract was reduced after protest. "I would like to think that that would have been caught by the tech steering committee."

Richardson suggested that a more symbolic aspect of the administration's technology

approach signified its broader vision: that women held all the major positions, from Tantoco to Roest and Singleton.

"I think that's really significant, really important and it speaks to the interest of creating an actual integrated team," he said. "Not because they're women but rather that they are all women speaks to it, [in] a field that's so dominated by men to have a city's technology interests run all and only by women. It's pretty cool."

MORE: CITY HALL   ANNE ROEST   BEN KALLOS   BETANYC   BILL DE BLASIO   DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION   DOITT   HELEN ROSENTHAL   JAMES VACCA   MICHAEL BLOOMBERG   MINERVA TANTOCO   NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL   PRE-K   RACHEL HAOT   TECH   TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

Back

Author: **MIRANDA NEUBAUER**   FOLLOW THIS REPORTER

← **MORE IN CITY HALL** →

Chief medical examiner pressed on turnaround times

MORE FROM POLITICO

In Albany, de Blasio declares 'common cause' with CUNY

NYCHA has been cooperating with federal inquiry for months

NYPL hires former BBC archivist as chief digital officer

After a rough start, de Blasio masters St. Patrick's Day

POLITICONEW YORK _beta_   ABOUT US   EVENTS   ADVERTISE   CONTACT   PRIVACY POLICY   TERMS AND CONDITIONS