



April 13, 2012

Ms. Elizabeth Weinstein
Chair, Reports & Advisory Board Review Commission
Director, Mayor's Office of Operations
253 Broadway, 10th Floor
New York, NY 10007

Dear Chair Weinstein,

Citizens Union is pleased that the Reports & Advisory Board Review Commission ("the Commission") has been formed by the city pursuant to the ballot referenda supported by the voters in 2012, and would like to offer you our thoughts on the approach of the commission as it begins its work in 2012. We supported the creation of the Commission via the 2010 Charter Revision Commission, and believe that it has the potential to provide for greater efficiency in city government, as well as improve public access to city government information.

We attended the Commission's first public meeting on February 28, 2012, and plan to testify to the Commission at its May 11th hearing regarding specific reporting requirements proposed for waiver or modification. As a good government organization focused on process issues, we first wanted to provide you with a number of recommendations regarding public engagement and the Commission's evaluation process for individual reporting requirements and advisory boards. Below are our recommendations in these two areas.

Engaging the Public

- **Public outreach:** The Commission should provide information about the number of persons and types of organizations contacted (not specific names or contact information) regarding its proposed recommendations and the upcoming public hearing, and the manner in which the public was notified.

- **Additional public hearings:** The Commission should hold several public hearings after receiving feedback at the May 11th scheduled hearing. It should issue a preliminary report in advance of at least one additional public hearing regarding its findings from the first hearing and proposed actions. Given that this Commission was first formed this year, it is likely that the public is largely unaware of it, and additional hearings would allow additional members of the public who missed the first public hearing the opportunity to provide feedback. One hearing is also likely inadequate to publicly vet all 14 reporting requirements and 7 advisory boards regarding their possible modification or elimination.

- **Commission information and website:** We are pleased that the Commission has developed a separate website that is easily searchable from the internet, and contains information regarding the upcoming public hearing and the work and history of the Commission. We suggest that the website be linked to from the main city website (the Charter Revision Commission of 2010 website, for example, is present in a drop down menu on the main nyc.gov website), and be listed on other relevant city agency homepages such as the Department of Records and Information Services website, and the Mayor's Office of Operations website. We also have the following recommendations for content on the Commission website.
 - The Commission website should contain links to the current location of reports slated for elimination or modification or actual copies of the reports (if they are not currently available online); for advisory boards, links to the websites of the boards or any relevant materials should be provided.
 - A list of the commissioners and their titles and appointing authorities should be provided on the Commission website at a minimum, and possibly additional biographical or other relevant information.
 - The Commission website should also contain copies of the public comment received, as well as video or transcripts of hearings and its public meetings. The Commission should also consider webcasting its meetings to allow additional members of the public to view its proceedings.
 - The Commission's website should provide the full, current list of all reporting requirements and advisory boards on its website. The public has a right to know all required reports and commissions so that individuals and organizations are able to suggest the elimination or reduction of those not initially suggested by the Mayor's Office of Operations.

The Commission's Process of Vetting Reporting Requirements and Advisory Boards

- **Data on public usage:** In vetting reports and advisory bodies, the Commission should obtain data and information regarding the usage of reports by the public. Such information should be obtained through:
 - tracking the number of downloads of reports which are available online (Local Law 11 of 2003 provides that such agency reports that are provided to the Mayor and Council be posted online through the Department of Records, however, there is not sufficient compliance with this law);
 - listing the number of Freedom of Information requests for such reports and data; and
 - soliciting direct feedback from known users of the reports regarding their utility.

To the extent that reports are not made easily accessible to the public or are not available online, the commission should note this information in its evaluation. All information obtained in this vetting process should be made available to the public for each report on the Commission's website.

- **Current criteria for evaluation:** The Mayor's Office of Operations should go beyond the information provided in the document made available at the first public meeting and provide a preliminary rationale for the proposed elimination or reduction for each report and task force or commission. The initial listing of reports proposed by the Commission for elimination or modification currently contains only rationales from City Agencies for full or waivers related to redundancy concerns or whether the data is still relevant in light of changing circumstances. The preliminary rationale, at minimum, should be made with specific reference to all criteria in the law and any additional criteria that were used. It may also be desirable to create a scoring system for evaluating reports and task forces or commissions into the evaluative process to ensure strict adherence to the criteria and reduce subjectivity in the evaluative process.

- **Additional criterion for consideration and recommending that reports be improved:** It is also worth noting that the Commission has the ability to recommend modifying existing reports to make them more useful to the public. In vetting reports and advisory boards, particularly after receiving public input, the Commission may receive additional information regarding the utility of reports that points to the need for improving the reporting requirements rather than waiving them. In evaluating the usefulness of reports, Citizens Union believes that an additional criterion should be considered: current public availability. Reports may only be as useful to the public as they are aware of their existence. Therefore, it is essential that the Commission also consider whether reports could be modified to enhance their usefulness or ensure that they are publicly available in a meaningful way.

Citizens Union would welcome the opportunity to meet with you in person to discuss these recommendations and answer any questions you might have. Should you be interested in setting up a meeting, please contact Rachael Fauss, Policy and Research Manager at 212-227-0342 ext. 10. We also look forward to presenting you our specific recommendations on individual reports and advisory boards at the May 11th hearing.

Sincerely,



Alex Camarda
Director of Public Policy and Advocacy



Rachael Fauss
Policy and Research Manager

Cc:

City Council Speaker Christine C. Quinn
Councilmember Gale A. Brewer
Councilmember Leroy Comrie
Corporation Counsel Michael Cardozo
Mark Page, Director Office of Management & Budget
Commissioner Carole Post, Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications
Seth Grossman, Counsel, City Council Governmental Affairs Committee