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To: NYC Mayor's Office
From: Klara Moeckel
Subject: Building the City That Shows Up "NYC Together"

As New York City begins a new chapter under Mayor Mamdani's direction, the spirit of civic engagement is clear. With the largest turnout in more than 50 years and an unparalleled increase in the number of young New Yorkers casting ballots, the 2025 election signaled a sea change in the city's democratic engagement. These days, that spirit of mobilization necessitates structure, longevity, and design. The question is how to turn an enthusiastic moment into a lasting civic habit.

Building on that, this proposal recognizes that although the election reignited civic pride, sustaining New Yorkers' interest in the city between elections is a more pressing issue. By applying the ideas of **social proof**, **commitment-consistency**, and **collective efficacy**, the "NYC Together" initiative seeks to transform civic engagement from a fleeting fad into a lasting culture. By applying behavioral insights to communication, design, and community infrastructure, New York can become a self-supporting city instead of one that only takes part in one election.

The Behavioral Roadblocks to Lasting Civic Action

Despite 2025's record-breaking turnout, New York civic engagement often reflects a familiar pattern: an emotional high during election cycles, followed by a gradual decline once the initial sense of purpose wears off. Behavioral science explains why enthusiasm alone cannot sustain participation. Even motivated citizens are deterred from taking action by structural and psychological frictions after the campaign energy subsides.

One important contributing factor is **present bias**, which is the tendency to prioritize short-term gains over long-term ones. Voting or volunteering may seem intangible compared to the instant gratification of digital engagement or personal commitments. If civic habits are not immediately reinforced, they do not develop. The city's traditional outreach tactics, which include emails, posters, and text reminders and appeal to logic rather than emotion, fall short of filling the motivational gap.

This is made worse by **status quo bias**, or the cognitive comfort of routine. After the election, people go back to their usual routines, assuming "someone else will handle it." In a city as fast-paced as New York, time constraints and mental fatigue compete with civic engagement. Feeling that one's individual contribution is insignificant, even for those who care deeply, is a sign of diminished **collective efficacy**, the shared conviction that one's actions matter because others are also participating.

Lastly, trust remains an implicit barrier. **Trust asymmetry** illustrates how a single perceived setback, like an unappreciated volunteer effort or a delayed city service, can quickly erode confidence, even though a single positive experience can somewhat increase it. Many working-class and immigrant residents used to disengage, not because they were disinterested but rather to avoid disappointment. Without systems that exhibit transparency, appreciation, and progress, civic motivation degenerates into skepticism.

Civic engagement is reframed as a design challenge rather than a knowledge problem by acknowledging these behavioral barriers. The next phase, "NYC Together," employs behavioral architecture to make participation rewarding, evident, and routine in order to guarantee that the momentum of 2025 becomes a long-lasting feature of New York's civic culture.

Reframing Civic Life: Who We Engage and Why It Matters

The next phase of civic life in New York must appeal to a generation that expects participation to be significant, visible, and intimate. The "NYC Together" campaign focuses on New Yorkers between the ages of 18 and 40, who

are disproportionately underrepresented in local participation despite helping to set a record turnout for the 2025 election. This community is made up of students, young professionals, creatives, first-generation New Yorkers, and service workers who think they can have a positive influence on the city's future but rarely get to witness it in action.

This audience is behaviorally defined by *identity-based motivation*, which is the desire to act in ways that are consistent with one's self-concept. Supporting causes, sharing innovations, and influencing peers are now more important aspects of civic engagement for many young adults than fulfilling obligations. Civic structures haven't changed to live up to that expectation, though. They continue to rely on transactional exchanges—voting, volunteering, and attending—in the absence of the clear reciprocity or community recognition that motivates sustained action.

Social media has demonstrated the power of *social proof* when people see others modeling participation. Whether through mutual aid organizations or neighborhood cleanups, public visibility validates effort and makes donations seem contagious. However, city-run programs hardly ever recognize or celebrate engagement. As a result, civic pride exists but is not reinforced by design, and behavior and intention are not aligned.

This initiative focuses on that behavioral gap. It addresses the "invisible civic class"—those who care but feel their impact is underappreciated. The goal is to replace silent effort with shared visibility by using behavioral and design cues that make participation feel routine, rewarding, and community-based. That shift makes voting on election day more than simply checking a box; it becomes an essential aspect of being a New Yorker.

Introducing NYC Together: A Behavioral Platform for Lasting Engagement

The "NYC Together" behavioral-design project establishes civic engagement as a visible, rewarding, and self-sustaining social norm. It reinterprets what it means to "show up" for New York and connects behavioral reinforcement with local pride by combining digital infrastructure with community-based incentives.

At its core, the program provides a user-friendly platform that enables citizens of New York to document civic engagements, including voting, meeting attendance, and daily acts of service. Tutoring students, assisting at community gardens, feeding homeless neighbors, cleaning up neighborhoods, and sharing resources and information among boroughs are all examples of this. By broadening the definition of civic engagement, the project encourages all residents to perceive themselves as contributing to the overall development of the city.

The program ensures equitable participation while boosting residents' sense of pride and is validated by existing NYC systems such as public libraries, CUNY/SUNY IDs, or DMV logins.

"NYC Together"'s behavioral engine is based on a number of proven principles:

- **Commitment–Consistency Bias:** Once users start tracking their participation, they are more likely to keep going. Customized streaks and milestones enhance civic identity and reliability.
- **Social Proof:** Every action that is documented is displayed on a citywide impact map, which is a dynamic depiction of our collective progress. Witnessing vibrant communities promotes emotional contagion and normalizes involvement in public life.
- **Endowment Effect:** People feel more proud of their contributions when they can see the overall impact of their work. By displaying metrics like "Hours Contributed" and "Neighborhood Impact Score" on the app's dashboard, effort is transformed into ownership.
- **Reciprocity:** Local incentives and public recognition complete the feedback loop; when the city reciprocates, participation feels valued rather than exploited.

By combining accessible design with behavioral reinforcement, "NYC Together" creates a feedback loop where participation results in visibility, visibility feeds pride, and pride sustains engagement. Building on the 2025 mobilization's success, it aims to establish a culture of regular civic engagement that is based on shared identity rather than obligation.

Turning Momentum Into a Movement

New York is a special place where optimism and responsibility coexist. The 2025 election demonstrated what can happen when civic life feels visible, personal, and shared. However, daily participation—rather than the number of attendees on a particular day—is what defines true democracy. To preserve this moment, the city must view civic engagement as a design challenge that skillfully combines communication, behavioral insight, and community infrastructure.

"NYC Together" offers a road map for that transformation. The program transforms civic duty into inclusive, visible, and rewarding participation, building on the strengths already present in our neighborhoods. It recognizes that volunteering can take many different forms, such as organizing tenants, serving meals, mentoring children, cleaning up a park, or casting a ballot in a local election. Every act of kindness strengthens the same social fabric that propelled this city's historic mobilization.

As behavioral science reminds us, participation thrives when it feels valued, visible, and contagious. Through the use of strategic incentives, community recognition, and an open culture, "NYC Together" would make civic engagement self-reinforcing rather than episodic. Short-term momentum would be converted to long-term motion.