

# Empowering New York City: A Three-Phase Strategy for Community-Owned Digital Infrastructure

**To:** The Honorable Zohran Mamdani, Mayoral Transition Team

**From:** Manus AI, on behalf of the NYC Transition Team Project

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**Subject:** A Proposal for a People-Powered Digital Future: Imagine, Plan, Build

## Introduction: From Techno-Feudalism to Digital Democracy

Our city stands at a critical juncture. The prevailing model of digital infrastructure, dominated by a few powerful monopolies, has led to a form of **techno-feudalism** that stifles innovation, extracts value from our communities, and deepens the digital divide. We have a historic opportunity to counter this trend by fostering a new ecosystem built on **open-source software, open-access networks, and community ownership**. This document outlines a three-phase strategy—**Imagine, Plan, and Build**—to create a more equitable, resilient, and prosperous New York City by empowering our communities to own and govern their digital future.

We will show how to establish a **digital platform cooperative** that creates jobs at the community level, providing human-to-human support services that leverage cutting-edge AI tools. This approach will appeal to key partners like the **National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA)**, the **American Association for Public Broadband (AAPB)**, and the **National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA)**, as it aligns with their missions of cooperative ownership, public infrastructure, and digital equity.

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## Phase 1: Imagine - Expanding Our Sense of the Possible

The first step is to break free from the limited thinking imposed by the current market. We must expand our collective imagination to envision a future where digital infrastructure is a public good, not a private commodity. We can do this by drawing on powerful, easily understood metaphors.

## Ambient Connectivity: The Sidewalks of the Digital Age

We must reframe our understanding of internet access. As technologist Bob Frankston argues, we should treat connectivity as an ambient utility, as readily available and assumed as the sidewalks we walk on <sup>1</sup>. Frankston's concept of "**Ambient Connectivity**" posits that the goal is the exchange of ideas, not the transport of data packets. By focusing on the endpoints of a conversation rather than the path between them, we can unlock tremendous innovation. This means shifting from a model of purchasing "access" from a provider to one of investing in a shared, open infrastructure that everyone can use to connect and create.

"The entire telecommunications industry is an answer to a single question: how to communicate over a distance? Even if it was the right answer in 1800, today it's limiting, very costly and fundamentally flawed because ideas aren't the same as cargo." - Bob Frankston <sup>1</sup>

## The Brooklyn Microgrid: A Blueprint for Digital Sharing

The **Brooklyn Microgrid** provides a powerful, local example of this principle in action <sup>2</sup>. By enabling neighbors to produce, share, and sell excess solar energy through a peer-to-peer network, it demonstrates that communities can create and manage their own essential infrastructure. We can apply this same model to the digital world, creating **community data and service microgrids**. Instead of our data being harvested and monetized by distant corporations, it can be stored and used locally, fueling a regenerative economy where value circulates within our neighborhoods.

## Digital Public Infrastructure: The New Rural Electrification

Just as the Rural Electrification Act brought power to underserved communities in the 1930s through cooperatives, we can build a **Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)** for the 21st century <sup>3</sup>. This involves creating community-owned data centers, mesh networks, and open-source platforms. This approach, championed by organizations like VerdantData, turns the digital divide into a source of **digital dividends**, creating local wealth and resilience instead of enriching monopolies <sup>4</sup>.

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## Phase 2: Plan - Tools for a Collaborative Future

With an expanded vision, the next phase is to equip our communities with the tools and organizational structures needed to collaborate effectively. This involves adopting proven models for cooperative governance and community capacity building.

## The Platform Cooperative: Owned by the People Who Use It

We propose the creation of a **platform cooperative**, a digital platform owned and governed by its members—the workers, users, and community stakeholders <sup>5</sup>. This model, exemplified by CommunityInternet.net, is built on the seven internationally recognized cooperative principles, ensuring democratic control and equitable economic participation <sup>6</sup>. This cooperative will serve as a digital town square, marketplace, and school, all in one.

Cooperative Principle	Application in a Digital Platform Cooperative
<b>Voluntary &amp; Open Membership</b>	Anyone who agrees to the terms of service can join and participate.
<b>Democratic Member Control</b>	Members vote on platform rules, features, and leadership.
<b>Member Economic Participation</b>	Value generated by the platform is distributed among members.
<b>Autonomy &amp; Independence</b>	The cooperative is self-governing and not controlled by outside investors.
<b>Education, Training &amp; Info</b>	The platform provides resources for members to learn and grow.
<b>Cooperation Among Co-ops</b>	The platform connects with other cooperatives to build a larger ecosystem.
<b>Concern for Community</b>	The platform prioritizes the well-being of the community it serves.

## State-of-the-Art Collaboration Tools

To facilitate this new mode of governance, we will leverage powerful open-source tools:

- **Decidim:** A participatory democracy platform developed by the city of Barcelona, allowing for large-scale citizen deliberation, proposal development, and voting <sup>7</sup>.
- **Loomio:** A collaborative decision-making tool designed for cooperatives and other non-hierarchical organizations, helping groups discuss proposals and reach consensus <sup>8</sup>.

## The Train-the-Trainer Model: Creating Local Jobs and Expertise

A core component of this plan is a **train-the-trainer program** that creates jobs for community members to provide human-to-human support services. This peer educator model is a proven method for building community capacity and disseminating knowledge effectively <sup>9</sup>. We will train a cohort of community members to become experts in using AI

tools and navigating the digital landscape. These trainers will then provide “**No Shit Support**” —real, human-centered assistance to their neighbors, ensuring that no one is left behind in the digital transition <sup>10</sup>. This directly addresses the mission of the **National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA)** by creating a scalable, community-based model for digital inclusion <sup>11</sup>.

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## Phase 3: Build - A Human-Centered AI Ecosystem

The final phase is to build the technical and social infrastructure that will power this new ecosystem. This involves a novel approach to AI that prioritizes human agency and a system for valuing and exchanging community contributions.

### AI Agents with a Human Interface

We will embrace a new paradigm of software development where the user interface is not a static screen, but a dynamic, agent-driven experience. As explained by technologist Nate Jones, the future of software lies in a three-layer stack <sup>12</sup>:

1. **Durable System of Record:** The core data, workflows, and APIs that form the stable foundation.
2. **Agentic Intelligence Layer:** AI agents that can plan, reason, and orchestrate tasks.
3. **Disposable Pixel Layer:** A fluid, on-demand user interface generated by AI to meet the specific needs of the user at that moment.

This model, which we see in platforms like CommunityAgents.AI, allows us to leverage the power of AI without being locked into a single, rigid interface <sup>13</sup>. It puts the human in control, with AI agents acting as powerful assistants, not replacements.

### Tokenizing Services: Making Community Value Visible

To reduce friction and create a vibrant local economy, we will **tokenize the services** provided by our community trainers and support staff. Using blockchain technology, we can create digital tokens that represent service credits, governance rights, or even ownership shares in the cooperative <sup>14</sup>. This has several key benefits:

- **Creates a Marketplace:** Community members can easily exchange tokens for the support services they need.
- **Reduces Friction:** It makes the value of community contributions visible, tangible, and easily tradable.
- **Enables Micro-Investment:** It allows for new models of financing, where community members can make small investments in their own digital infrastructure.

This approach makes Bob Frankston’s notion of “ambient connectivity” a practical reality by creating a frictionless medium for exchanging value within the community.

## Conclusion: A Call to Action

This three-phase strategy provides a roadmap for building a more just and equitable digital future for New York City. By embracing the principles of community ownership, cooperative governance, and human-centered technology, we can create a vibrant ecosystem that generates local wealth, creates meaningful jobs, and empowers all New Yorkers to participate fully in the digital age. We urge the Mamdani transition team to champion this vision and work with us to make it a reality.

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