



NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL MEMBER

BEN KALLOS

City Council District 5

Upper East Side & Roosevelt Island

Policy Book

New York City is on the precipice of major change in government, as we have elected a new Mayor, Comptroller and Public Advocate, with nearly half the City Council having turned over this year. This creates an opportunity for a new class of idealistic representatives to build a new New York City where we can all afford to live and work.

I hope to capitalize on this dramatic opportunity for change as a member of the City Council. I will use my background leading a good government group, a former chief of staff, a lawyer and a software developer to benefit the Upper East Side, where I grew up, and our city as a whole. I will join with other elected officials and the new leadership of our city agencies to create the kind of transparent, open government that has only become possible in the 21st century.

The solutions that follow will benefit constituents and not moneyed interests. I'll stay committed to providing residents with more information of higher quality, so I can be part of a government worthy of the world's greatest city.



Biography

Ben Kallos grew up on the Upper East Side with a single mother and his grandparents who immigrated from Hungary to escape anti-Semitism. At Rabbi Arthur Schneier's Park East Day School he learned the value of *tikun olam* (repairing the world) and he took it with him to Bronx Science, SUNY Albany and SUNY Buffalo Law School, where he paid his own way. While working as an attorney recovering benefits promised but never paid to workers, he realized the extent to which our laws and legal system were in need of repair and chose to enter public service.

In 2009, disappointed by the dysfunction he saw while serving as a chief of staff in Albany, Ben put Assembly voting records online for free for the first time through a website he built called **OpenLegislation.org**. His work galvanized Albany powerbrokers to begin posting legislative records themselves later that year. Ben shared how he got the voting records with the technology team at the New York Times and supplied the code he used to the Sun Light Foundation, which eventually hired his lead developer to bring that same state legislative transparency nationwide at **OpenStates.org**.

Since then, he has served as Executive Director of New Roosevelt, a good government group founded by Bill Samuels, that worked on the successful campaign to elect Senator Gustavo Rivera over now-sentenced then-Senator Pedro Espada. Ben has also served as Policy Director for former Public Advocate Mark Green with whom he worked on "100 Ideas for a Better City."

Ben has been a practicing attorney, technology entrepreneur, community board member and voting rights leader. Ben hopes to build on his record of using our best tools to reduce corruption and make our city government work for those who need it most.

Background

Ben has built a vibrant team of community volunteers whom he has mentored and empowered to get results:

- Launching the “**Bring Back Our Booths**” program to improve subway safety that has been taken up by transit advocates and candidates for office citywide;
- Created numerous websites to improve our city, including **VoteWithKids.com** to improve youth voting, **VotersGive.com** a fundraising platform for candidates for city office to reduce barriers to entry, and most recently **LightUp2ndAve.com** to improve lighting and safety along the Second Avenue Subway Construction.
- Testified in favor of protecting senior services at NYCHA, supporting infrastructure on Roosevelt Island and preserving park space on the East Side.

Government Reform and Transparency

New York has been rocked by so many corruption scandals that it reminds us how far our government has to go. Ben will help restore voters’ confidence by empowering them with tools and information to hold leaders accountable.

Real transparency in legislation: Open up the law for comment

Legislation passes in New York City with near unanimity – bills that are sometimes hundreds of pages long accompanied by memorandums that can omit crucial components. As an attorney, Ben has experience combing through city legislation – and knows that hidden provisions often never receive public hearing. Ben would advocate consolidating legislation and testimony online – and allowing New Yorkers to comment alongside the documents.

Ben’s open platform on his City Council campaign serves as a precedent of the principle: He took the 100 solutions for a better city he worked on as Policy Director for former Public Advocate Mark Green’s mayoral campaign and put them online where residents can vote on them, comment, improve upon them, or suggest their own. There are currently about 25 community solutions.

New York has the best and brightest, and we should engage them in the legislative process.

Open data: Set government information free

Ben testified in favor of the Open Data Law introduced by Council Member Gale Brewer and passed as Local Law 11 of 2012, which will be fully implemented in 2018. Ben is a strong advocate for transparency and has the technology expertise to carry on Brewer’s legacy.

Ben will take a lead role in shepherding the implementation of this law through partnership with the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications. Ben is a tech entrepreneur who writes software and understands both data and code. Together with his passion for transparent government, this will make him a key ally for open data advocates seeking to make the City Hall’s information open, accessible and easy to use.

Real transparency in government spending: Post all city contracts online

Despite strides made since the disastrous CityTime scandal, corruption remains rampant in the city's contracting process. Contract information is currently posted in two places. Checkbook2.0, a beta site through the Comptroller's office, posts current contracts, and the City Record Online (CROL) posts procurement solicitations and awards.

These two sites are missing key information – the bids from companies themselves for government contracts. Ben will propose legislation to create one centralized contract transparency site that includes company bids, so the public can see both the decision process and who wins them. The city can bring its practice of holding public hearings held on most contracts over \$100,000 into the 21st century by making more information easily accessible online.

The culture of backroom dealing allows developers to gain windfalls from government giveaways and contracts to go to political insiders, costing the city hundreds of millions each year. Ben supports a system where journalists and the public can better oversee government spending.

Education

Our city must champion equal opportunity by offering help to children who need it most during times the system lets them slip through the cracks, like early childhood and after school. Ben supports expanding gifted and talented programs, so more children can get the kind of education he received at Bronx Science.

Pop-up Schools: Create seats now to address current need

School District 2, encompassing the Upper East Side and most of Manhattan, is becoming increasingly overcrowded, causing stress for families and eroding the quality of education. There are also an insufficient number of Gifted & Talented slots for all students who test into the 97th percentile and require accelerated learning.

The city lacks space to build new public schools, and doing so not only costs hundreds of millions of dollars but also takes years. By taking advantage of empty commercial space – over 10% of Manhattan office spaces are currently vacant – Ben will partner with the Department of Education to create temporary or permanent schools to alleviate overcrowding today.

Early education for all: Provide Universal Pre-K

Single parents in New York City are often trapped in poverty because the city has only 20,000 full-day free public Pre-K for all 68,000 kids who qualify. A lack of free childcare traps families in cyclical poverty, while the educational, psychological and social benefits of Pre-K have been well documented. Ben was raised by a single mother, and knows the importance of education benefits for families like his.

The more money the city spends on Pre-K, the more families can go to work – creating economic opportunity and strengthening the city with extra tax dollars. A parent can earn up to \$40,000 while still qualifying for free or subsidized pre-K – paying an estimated \$8,800 in taxes to partially make up for the city’s investment (an estimated \$5,000 voucher to subsidize pre-K or \$7,700 to fund a fully paid child). That, combined with progressive tax reform, can fund education programs that our city needs. Ben will fight to fully fund Universal Pre-K programs, making early education one of his main budgeting priorities.

Wrap-around benefits: Expand out-of-school offerings and participation



Between 2009 and 2012, participation levels in the city’s Department of Youth and Community Development Out-of-School Time program dropped by about 40 percent as the Mayor’s office continues to seek to slash the budget. Particularly for students from low-income families, after-school programs provide essential enrichment and keep children safe while parents work well beyond schools hours.

Ben will champion such innovative measures as complementing city free meal programs with community-supported agriculture (CSA) shares to children to bring to their families. Not only would this provide access to healthy, fresh food, but also would serve as incentive for parents to keep kids in after-school programs and allow them to verify attendance.

Student loan forgiveness program: offer free CUNY education for graduates who stay

Affording a college education has become a huge burden on young people and families – while a degree has become a prerequisite to even the most entry-level job. This generation is the first one projected to be less well off than their parents – underscoring the need for social programs that benefit young people.

Ben will seek legislation to have CUNY provide loans to all students regardless of their citizen status, then forgive 10% of each year a graduate remains in the city. Those who graduate with a bachelor’s degree – earning more than one million more in lifetime earnings – would be incentivized to stay in New York City, contributing to the tax base for a windfall return on investment.

			
	Bachelor's Degree	High School Graduate	Difference
Avg. Income	\$56,788	\$31,071	\$25,717
Career Avg.	\$2,271,520	\$1,242,840	\$1,028,680
Income Tax			
Federal	\$10,322	\$4,236	\$6,086
NY State	\$3,345	\$1,687	\$1,658
NY City	\$1,878	\$963	\$916
NY Total	\$5,223	\$2,650	\$2,574
Total Taxes	\$15,545	\$6,885	\$8,660

Affordable Housing

For all but the wealthiest, making rent is a struggle in New York – a particular problem in the Manhattan neighborhoods Ben seeks to represent. For his commitment to tenants' rights, Tenants PAC endorsed Ben, calling him a "person of action," not just ideas.

Centralized database for affordable housing applications: streamline finding an apartment

Ben believes the affordable housing application process must be transparent and as easy as possible. The city has a number of subsidized-housing programs – from Mitchell-Lama to 421-a – and it must not be a struggle for individuals to find and apply for the ones for which they are eligible.

As a City Council Member, Ben will reduce red tape by sponsoring legislation to centralize the application process so that people can apply for all options receiving city subsidies in the same place. The site would allow applicants to receive updates on the process and publicly display the results of the process in order to prevent or alleviate allegations of impropriety.

Set aside more affordable housing: Reform the 421-a tax abatement

Private developers receive a 10-25 year property tax abatement if they construct a new building on under-utilized or unused land and, in exchange, set aside 20% of those new units for decades of affordable housing. But Ben believes that this tax incentive is not doing nearly enough to address the lack of reasonably priced housing in Manhattan.

We can further reform the 421-a tax abatement program, forcing developers to temporarily set aside more of their units in exchange for this tax windfall, while also keeping more units permanently affordable. Ben also believes in reassessing the exclusion zones as neighborhoods undergo gentrification.

Responsible Development

Lucrative development deals are often opportunities for corruption and patronage. Ben will seek to allow communities to oversee the process to ensure that such deals not only grow our city but support existing neighborhoods.

Sustainable development: Require development to support local infrastructure

To keep our city livable, new development must come with obligations to communities, including improving schools, transportation and open spaces. Ben will negotiate with major developers to ensure that any new development supports the local infrastructure on which it relies.

In keeping with this aim, Ben offered testimony to the City Planning Commission and the City Council in coordination with Roosevelt Island Residents Association and Roosevelt Island Community Coalition in favor of Cornell NYC Tech supporting the community. The testimony and activism of these Roosevelt Island community groups achieved many concessions, and Ben was proud to be a part of the community's collective voice.

Put the “public” back in public-private partnerships for development: Hold hearings on all real estate development deals, including “as-of-right”

New Yorkers should have a meaningful role in development that occurs in their neighborhoods. But too often, decisions are made unilaterally, without community input. Ben would sponsor legislation requiring even “as-of-right” development of public land that complies with zoning standards to hold community board hearings to increase transparency.

Increasing the oversight for “as-of-right” development would help prevent developers from trying to skate around the review process and would prevent potentially costly opposition and lawsuits down the line. Ben would make public comments, transcripts, and material presented at such hearings easily accessible online for all to see in order to increase accountability and community input.

The Economy

New York’s economy is thriving – but only for the wealthiest, the top one percent of whom earn a third of the city’s income. Our city can spend more on social benefits for those who need them funded by reducing to waste on graft, slush funds and bad deals.

Universal broadband: Expand public broadband and access for low-income families

New York City has become the fastest growing technological center in the country, but city government could do more to maximize our potential. The Center for an Urban Future evaluated our city’s broadband service and gave it a B- or B grade in its study “New Tech City.” Ben initially advocated to provide low-income communities with free or low cost computers and Internet access in 2009 as part of the renewal of the city’s cable franchise agreement. While this didn’t happen, Comcast later rolled this program out voluntarily in 39 states. In order to bridge the digital divide, Ben will demand more from our private partners and franchisees so that our residents receive the services they need.

Civic commons: save on government software

Use of free and open source software (FOSS) means that if one city updates software, everyone benefits – a smart, collective approach that represents the future of tech-savvy government. New York City can save millions – if not billions – by collectively financing the development of software for government use by the federal, state as well as more than 289 other cities.

Ben will sponsor a bill requiring the city to consider free and open source software before purchasing proprietary software that belongs to a vendor – in order to escape the current system of waste where different agencies pay multiple times for the same software from a single vendor.

A web developer since the age of 14, Ben was featured in the New York Times as a teenager in an article titled “An After-School Job That's Not Kids' Stuff.” Ben has built a record of championing free and open source software for the city, by creating, for instance, a user-friendly Drupal website for Community Board 8 that has already saved the city thousands of dollars a year.

Progressive tax reform: repeal city income taxes on those who can afford it least

New York City has one of the highest rates of income inequality in the United States. Our city taxes the incomes of almost quarter million low-and-moderate-income households that the Federal and State governments do not. In coordination with Albany and other members of City Council, Ben would advocate the repeal of income taxes on households that do not owe Federal or State Income tax or earn less than \$40,000 a year.

To make up for the shortfall, Ben proposes a small fraction of a percent tax increases on households earning more than half a million dollars a year. While some have argued that our city's richest would leave in mass exodus over any increase, Ben believes that the wealthiest New Yorkers would pitch in to help those most affected by economic downturn.

Transportation

Our public transportation systems are the lifeblood of New York – supporting our businesses or simple daily routines. Ben believes that public transportation offers one of the most exciting arenas for innovation that makes quality of life better for New Yorkers.

Supporting transportation alternatives: Expand ferry service

When the brand new Cornell NYC Tech Campus opens, Roosevelt Island's population expected to increase by 20%. Senator Schumer has called for a "nerd boat" to connect major tech hubs in the city, including Roosevelt Island, the Upper East Side, Astoria and Brooklyn Bridge Park.

Ben will work with the MTA, Cornell University, and the Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation (RIOCC) to ensure that it happens. A RIOCC study has placed the cost between \$5.3 and \$7.2 million with a 12 to 18 month implementation timeline. When the City Council approved Cornell's application in May, they agreed to a summer pilot program for ferry service. Ben will seek the budget to make the "nerd boat" permanent to improve the morning commute for as many as possible.

Revisit congestion pricing: Implement a 10-year plan

With each passing year, Manhattan's roads and bridges become increasingly congested – leading to heavy traffic, unsafe conditions and smog. Ben believes our city is in desperate need of the transportation improvements promised by congestion pricing to reduce traffic and improve the environment in the city center. Ben proposes a congestion pricing plan implementable on a local level through city tolls that would go into effect a decade later, so the city has time to improve transportation today by borrowing against the projected earnings to accommodate the expected increase in public commuters before the need is created.

Equal rights

As an employment attorney, Ben understands that equal rights must be actively and vigilantly protected. He spoke out against stop-and-frisk profiling early, is a proud feminist endorsed by the National Organization for Women, and will pursue legislation to combat the discrimination that forces some members of our community to live with injustice and fear.

Reform stop-and-frisk: Allow all to feel safe walking down the street

Ben has been an outspoken opponent of the way stop-and-frisk currently works – focusing more than 87% of its stops on black and Latino men. Ben supports the Community Safety Act slated to go into effect in January 2014, recognizing that oversight of city bodies leads to better decisions, and would combat any attempts to intervene against or overturn it. He also believes an Inspector General will reform the unjust quota system that incentivizes unnecessary stops.

Empower young girls to explore STEM careers

Women in STEM careers earn 33% more than in others, but represent just 24% of the STEM workforce. New York City loses out on building its economic base along with valuable ingenuity when girls are pushed away from the most in-demand careers. While New York City is seeking to target more electives to girls interested in technology, the city's 2013 Executive Budget slashes after-school and school-based community centers by \$25 million. Through legislation and city partnerships with nonprofits, Ben would push for STEM-based after-school programs for girls.

Ben has a record of empowering young women: As a chief of staff in the Assembly, he helped pilot Women in Design, a career-based after-school program for young high schools students residing in Stanley Isaacs and Holmes' Towers public housing. Ben would also encourage efforts to recruit girls to the highest-level STEM classes.

Fund women's health: Promote equal access to care

Ben believes that women's health care programs must be fully funded so all can have access to the services they need. The 2013 Executive Budget of New York City cuts \$350,000 to Planned Parenthood for reproductive health programs for teenagers in need and \$2.5 million in infant mortality reduction programs in low-income areas. In budget deliberations, Ben would make these programs a top priority, recognizing the right of women and families to receive high-quality care regardless of income levels.

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