

**DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS
TESTIMONY BEFORE THE CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY IN GOVERNMENT
HEARING ON PROPOSED INTRO. 533 – WEBCASTING OF CITY HEARINGS/MEETINGS
WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2008**

Good morning Chair Brewer and members of the City Council Committee on Technology in Government. My name is Paul Cosgrave, the Commissioner of the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications, or DoITT, and New York City CIO. With me is Christopher Long, Director of Web Strategy & Operations and New York City's Webmaster. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding proposed City Council Intro. 533, which would require the recording, archiving and (where practicable) live webcasting on *NYC.gov* of all City hearings and meetings.

In keeping with Mayor Bloomberg's mandate to use technology to make New York City government more accessible, transparent, and accountable, the Administration agrees with the goal of enhancing current capabilities on *NYC.gov* to webcast public hearings and meetings. However, significant consideration must be given to the cost associated with this endeavor, as well as the size, scope and timeline of implementation. While there are relatively moderately-priced technological solutions available today to achieve this goal, there are both logistical and fiscal challenges inherent in developing a citywide solution. Though not at all insurmountable, we believe these issues should be fully considered before deciding upon a viable solution—legislative or otherwise—and timeline, and we are willing to keep the Council apprised of our progress in these areas as we explore options for moving forward.

Through NYC TV, DoITT today covers more than 530 New York City Council events each year, and has done so back to 2005; we have covered more than 450 so far in 2008. Channel 74 is dedicated to government coverage, including 61 programming hours per week of Council programming. On average, Council hearings usually air seven to ten days after they occur, though high-profile hearings are scheduled to the very next open air date. Channel 74 is streamed live today on *NYC.gov*, though the programming itself airs on tape delay and is not archived online. Efforts to webcast these hearings live are now underway by the City Council, and may involve a capital investment in the infrastructure of the Council chambers; archiving these hearings for on-demand access on *NYC.gov* would entail digitizing each event for storage on a server and assigned staff to manage the portfolio of hearings, additional costs to be considered.

We appreciate the work your staff has done in compiling the list of examples of other municipalities that have mandated webcasting. However, most of the municipalities listed—even larger ones such as Chicago (which estimated cost based *only* on webcasting its City Council hearings)—cannot compare with what is being proposed in this bill. This is illustrated by another municipality your staff has researched: Vancouver, British Columbia. Like New York City, Vancouver uses a combination of cable broadcasting and webcasting; and similar to today's proposed bill Vancouver requires access be made to an unlimited live audience and archiving for three months, for a total estimated cost per meeting of \$495.

Now, in New York City, a conservative estimate finds that in a given month, there may be more than 80 public hearings and meetings conducted by the City's Mayoral agencies, the City Council (stated meetings only) and Borough President Offices. This does not include another approximately 40 City Council committee meetings, an average of three meetings by each of the City's 59 community boards (between committees and subcommittees), or special events such as bill signings or citywide addresses. All told, that is more than 3,000 events per year to be webcast live, recorded, captured, documented and archived on *NYC.gov* for future access by the public. Using Vancouver's model as a rough baseline—which may or may not prove to be a replicable one for New York City—and not counting the initial equipment costs, this would mean nearly \$1.6 million in annual recurring cost to meet the requirements in the proposed bill.

Comparing this with the cost New York State incurred when mandating webcasting for all its agencies via Executive Order in 2007, the State committed nearly \$2 million to implement its directive for 65 agencies in the initial four months of the program, not including staff expenses. The \$2 million figure consists of a one-time outlay of approximately \$1.1 for equipment and \$800,000 in recurring costs for captioning and other services (one estimate of captioning services for deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals, for example, is \$315 per hour). While not explicitly required as per Intro. 533, consistent with the accessibility of City services captioning is an added consideration that should be assessed before proceeding with a comprehensive webcasting effort. It is clear that to date, efforts at the State level have required significant funding – one primary contract for webcasting services that State agencies may leverage includes a cost of \$1,500 per meeting, not including the captioning services described above.

What should also be noted here is that to a large extent, the State webcasts consist of one mounted, stationary camera, streaming live via connection to a broadband-enabled PC. Accordingly, there is little-to-no production value: no multiple camera angles, no “lower-third” graphics associated with the speaker, his/her title, or the topic or date the event. Instead, the meetings appear as they would to a silent observer—a “fly on the wall,” if you will. Any additional production elements required—during the live webcast or for archived events—would require significant increases in staffing levels across the city, as they would need to either attend every hearing or conduct considerable post-production work. As such we would propose that the number of required webcast events be limited, at least in the initial phases of deployment.

Another challenge presented by Intro. 533 as drafted is the 90-day timeframe provided for implementation. Returning to the New York State example, consistent with the executive order issued in January 2007 agencies were required to present their plans for webcasting public events within 90 days, with an additional three months allotted thereafter to implement their plans, for a total of 180 days. We believe a similar timeframe would be appropriate at the municipal level as well, taking into account both the size of the City of New York and the sheer volume of public hearings and meetings its agencies, committees, commissions and task forces conduct regularly. As part of statewide implementation, which proceeded in an essentially federated manner by agency, the State Offices for Technology and General Services offered policy guidance and roundtable discussions, set minimum requirements for open meeting webcasts, improved procurement options and provided technical assistance in equipping meeting facilities. In developing a plan for phased implementation at the City level, DoITT would explore similar measures.

A final consideration is retention standards across agencies, since not all events will require similar archiving. A community board meeting will likely appeal to a much more limited audience than City Council Speaker Quinn’s *State of the City Address*, though each might require the same bandwidth for storage if they are of similar duration. The longer the retention schedule for such meetings, the more storage is required, which in turn results in a significant increase in cost. Therefore the City—or individual agencies should webcasting proceed in a decentralized way as it did at the State level—will also need to invest in additional technical support staff, which will also increase commensurate with the number of public meetings and hearings included. That same community board might decide that on a limited budget, three months is adequate for archived meetings and may not wish to be tied to the Council’s standard—which might be twice that length, for example.

Therefore, while the Administration certainly agrees with the spirit of the proposed legislation, and the added dimension of accessibility it would bring to the City's numerous public proceedings, it is clear that more consideration must be given to the timeline for deployment, the scope and phasing of the program, and any proposed retention schedules. While we do not support Intro. 533 in its current draft, the Administration is open to exploring the use of cost-effective measures to facilitate webcasting and archiving on a pilot basis for agencies conducting public hearings and other events on a regular basis in modern, broadband-equipped meeting rooms. We imagine these efforts would begin by asking those agencies to submit plans describing how each would implement its own webcasting capability over the subsequent months, developing from there a strategy for wider implementation. As part of this initial phase, we would hope to include those City Council hearings now part of NYC TV Channel 74 programming.

As always, we are pleased to keep the Council informed of these efforts, building on the strides already made with streaming City Council hearings through *NYC.gov*.

Thank you.