



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
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Testimony of Manhattan Borough President Gale A. Brewer
New York City Council Committee on Technology
Hearing on the Implementation of Local Law 103 of 2013
Requiring that All Public Meetings Be Webcast
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Good morning, my name is Gale A. Brewer and I am the Borough President of Manhattan. Prior to being elected Borough President, I served for twelve years in the City Council, including eight years as the Chair of this wonderful Committee. I was also the Primary Sponsor of Local Law 103 of 2013, which required that all public meetings be webcast.

I want to thank Chairman Vacca and the other Committee Members for holding this hearing on a topic that I believe is very timely. I also want to thank Cullen Howe, Counsel to the Committee, who worked with me to pass Local Law 103 last year. Local Law 103 will require that all public meetings by city agencies, committees, commissions, or task forces be webcast. This legislation will bring an unprecedented level of transparency to municipal government, by making public proceedings much more accessible for the public.

As we all know, the vast majority of public meetings take place during the standard workday, when many New Yorkers are working at THEIR jobs. By simultaneous webcasting or publicly posting video of important meetings, they will be able to view proceedings after the fact. This provides an important level of transparency and oversight, and should also lead to a better-informed electorate.

Although I believe strongly in the mission of webcasting all public hearings, this undertaking is not without its challenges. As Borough President, I am now responsible for my own small agency that must webcast its Borough Board meetings. There are three facets to the problem: video capture of the event, closed captioning of the event (required to conform to the ADA), and online video distribution of the event.

Neither our conference room at 1 Centre Street nor the conference room we will use in the State Office Building uptown were designed as television studios. With the fantastic assistance of the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment, we are in the process of identifying the necessary equipment to successfully capture our public proceedings. The equipment is not cheap however, and my understanding is that many small agencies are struggling with whether to invest in expensive technology. In my case for example, we are looking at capital costs of about \$20,000 to purchase the necessary equipment to record our hearings.

I have to admit that when we first started working on Local Law 103, we envisioned many small agencies implementing simple webcasting arrangements where they would have one camcorder recording a hearing. We did not fully consider the audio and visual elements that were required to capture high-quality recordings that the public would actually want to watch. The proceedings here today, for example, again thanks to the great staff of the Mayor's Office of Media and the Speaker's IT Division, are high quality, with great sound. Not every agency has meeting rooms like this at their disposal however, which makes webcasting more difficult. Also, the equipment in this room, as well as at City Hall, was paid for with cable franchise money, another luxury the rest of us do not have.

As we move forward with the implementation of this Law, I would ask that the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment (MoME) and the Department of Information Technology & Telecommunications (DoITT) serve a more hands-on role working with the various agencies on implementation. I know that MoME has the expertise to assist with webcasting, but they are currently operating without a Commissioner, and I believe are stretched to their limits given their current staff levels and resources. Similarly, DoITT has a fantastic staff who I believe support the mission of webcasting, but they are dealing with their own logistical challenges. For example, we have been told that, as an agency on the City's internet connection, CityNet, we cannot live stream our hearings over this connection. Instead, we are being asked to procure a private broadband provider if we want to live stream. Again, the issue of stressed bandwidth is not unique to DoITT, but if NYC wants to continue to be a leader in the tech sector and municipal transparency, expanding our broadband capabilities strikes me as a wise investment.

Thus, as we enter budget negotiations, I ask that everyone who supports the goal of webcasting consider increased funding for both MoME and DoITT to ensure that agencies have the assistance they need to comply with this important Law.

In the end, the benefits of webcasting far outweigh the costs, but agencies do deserve some assistance with the capital investment for webcasting equipment, as well as

some initial hand-holding so that they have trained staff who can capture video and audio that is useful for the public.

My staff has spoken with officials from the New York State government who are working on webcasting in Albany. They are struggling with some of the same issues as the City, in particular smaller meetings in rooms that were not designed for audio or video recording. However, overall it appears that many State agencies have found ways to webcast. According to representatives we spoke with, once initial equipment investments were made, and at least one dedicated technical staffer was identified, there was not a lot of ongoing support needed. For example, in the past two weeks there have been webcast meetings of the Cemetery Board, Public Authorities Control Board, Empire State Stem Cell Board, Dormitory Authority, and more. Although we must recognize the difficulties faced by agencies in their initial compliance with the webcasting requirement, I think the State's relative success indicates that it is not impossible to comply.

I will close with a brief mention of the second bill being discussed today, Intro 28 of 2014, which would require that all Community Board full board meetings be webcast. While I agree with Chairman's Vacca intent with this bill, I would highlight the fact that the issues faced by small agencies are even more serious for Community Boards, who have tiny budgets, few staff, and ever-changing meeting rooms which make webcasting difficult. I would hope that any requirement that Community Boards webcast their meetings include a strong financial commitment to assist them with purchasing equipment and learning how to adequately record and upload proceedings. I know that Manhattan's CB6 is currently webcasting their meetings, thanks to an arrangement they have to hold meetings at a facility that is equipped for webcasting. Pursuing more of these types of arrangements would be one approach to ease the burden on Community Boards. However, it should be noted that the last CB6 full board meeting had working audio, but no video, which should serve as a warning. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.