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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

**Testimony of Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Borough President
Hearing of the Commission on Public Information and Communication
May 19, 2015**

Good afternoon Public Advocate James and Members of the Commission on Public Information and Communication, or COPIC. I am very pleased to be here today to discuss a piece of legislation I was proud to introduce in the City Council, Local Law 103 of 2013, New York City's webcasting law. First and foremost, I want to thank Public Advocate James and her staff for focusing on the implementation of this important legislation.

As we all know, the vast majority of public meetings (such as this one), take place during the standard workday, when many New Yorkers are working at their jobs. Webcasting government meetings provides an important level of transparency and oversight, and should lead to a better-informed electorate. Although I clearly believe strongly in the mission of webcasting, this does not mean that the implementation has been simple.

First, let me describe some of the issues as they relate to my own office's compliance with the law. As a small agency, my office holds monthly Borough Board meetings that are required to be webcast. Because we wanted to ensure that we were actually creating professional-looking content, we have experimented with a number of different options for recording our meetings. Our first Borough

Board meeting was recorded by the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment, and subsequent meetings have been recorded by the fantastic staff of Manhattan Neighborhood Network. Without these gracious professionals' assistance, we would have struggled to record our early meetings.

The issues with webcasting go beyond simple video recording, however. Audio quality has been another obstacle, especially in large meeting rooms with multiple participants. Audio is really the most important aspect of these meetings, and is often overlooked in the discussion around webcasting. The third piece of the equation is transmission of the content. For city agencies like mine that rely on the CityNet system, DoITT has advised us not to livestream our hearings due to bandwidth constraints. Because of this, we have simply recorded and posted our videos on our website. Going forward, we hope to livestream future meetings. They have suggested we seek a third party provider such as Time Warner, adding an additional expense to our limited budget. While I recognize that all networks have their challenges, the inability of the city's broadband system to handle live streaming is a serious limitation. I am eager to learn today from other participants how they have dealt with these problems. In the interim, my office has gone forward with the capital purchase of a fairly robust 'plug and play' system of cameras and microphones that I hope will allow for a broadcast that viewers will appreciate.

Another issue I want to address is closed captioning of city meetings. I do not know of an ideal solution to captioning our videos for the deaf and hard of hearing communities, but I hope we can work together on a citywide solution. Despite these challenges, I reiterate that the benefits of webcasting far outweigh the costs. Ensuring that citizens have real access to their government requires that the city provide additional webcasting resources and assistance, especially for smaller agencies.

Finally, the webcasting law should perhaps be expanded to include coverage of Community Board meetings. When we were debating the legislation in the City Council, we made a decision to exempt Community Boards from compliance with webcasting because of the logistical challenges of complying. I did not want to set the Boards up to fail in implementation. My experience in webcasting Borough President meetings has shown that we were correct. Community Boards are understaffed, have limited resources, and meet in various places. These three factors make it seem unlikely that they would be able to implement successful webcasts without significant resources. While I believe in opening up Community Board hearings to the public, I suggest that we start with a pilot program before requiring compliance across all Boards.

One idea might be working with COPIC or DOITT to put together a webcasting working group. It could be an informal setting for agencies to share best practices and troubleshoot common problems. Smaller agencies like the

Campaign Finance Board that have been webcasting their hearings for several years are good examples, as they manage to do their webcasting on a small budget with limited staff. I am sure that by working together, we can come up with a better way to do webcasting across the city.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to hearing from everyone else in attendance on this important issue.