City of Baltimore

Legislation Text

City Council
City Hall, Room 408
100 North Holliday Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21202

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        INTRODUCTORY*

        CITY OF BALTIMORE
        COUNCIL BILL   R
        (Resolution)

Introduced by: President Young

        A RESOLUTION ENTITLED

A COUNCIL RESOLUTION concerning
Investigative Hearing - Broadcasting of Baltimore City Government Proceedings

FOR the purpose of examining the logistical requirements for, and efficacy of, requiring that meetings and/or hearings of the Board of Estimates, the Board of Municipal and Zoning Appeals, and the Board of Liquor License Commissioners be broadcast on cable TV or webcast to provide greater transparency, accountability, and openness to the workings of government and to give a wider audience to Baltimore City citizens unable to attend government meetings in person.
        Recitals

   Local Government Broadcasting of Public Meetings, Municipal Research and Services Center of Washington, reports that cablecasting and Internet webcasting of public meetings make the meetings more open and public by enabling persons to view meetings that they cannot attend. Some are broadcasting in audio only, some in cable only, and a growing number are now offering Internet broadcasts, either live or by archived meetings on demand. In the State of Washington, local governments provide Internet access to indexed video archives that coordinate the minutes of meetings with the meeting video.

   The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) in Broadcasts and Webcasts of Legislative Floor Proceedings and Committee Hearings, finds that as of February 18, 2010, live webcasts of legislative proceedings are available from at least one chamber in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. Many legislatures also are offering webcasts of all or selected committee hearings. About half the states also archive floor committee proceedings, for varying periods of time. At least 30 states and D.C. broadcast some legislative proceedings on television.

   Soon after his election the President of the United States took bold steps to inaugurate an era of government openness and transparency. In one of his first official acts, the President issued a Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government, affirming a commitment to achieving an "unprecedented level of openness in government," and stating that his administration will work together to "ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration. Openness will strengthen our democracy and promote efficiency and effectiveness in Government."

The U.S. General Services Administration report, Transparency and Open Government, presents the District of Columbia as being at the forefront of a new era in governance, one where technological advances now allow people around the world unfettered access to their government. Through the advances that are "Building the Digital Public Square", constituents can hold government accountable from the privacy of their own homes. D.C. is bringing people closer to government through collaborative technologies like wikis, data feeds, videos, and dashboards.

Baltimore City's entrance into the age of technology began in the early 1990s, when the City Council began broadcasting Monday night meetings and Wednesday night broadcast slots that rotated among the standing City Council Committees. In 1998, the City Council, in what was heralded as a revolutionary step in public access, completed the City Council website that was to include broadcasting of council meetings over the internet - a service that was not implemented due to budgetary constraints.

The transparency provided by the City Council to its regular Monday night meetings and the meetings of its major committees can be improved; however, it is still well beyond the transparency provided by other agencies of government. Citizens do not have access to the workings of the government agencies, departments, and commissions that affect the quality of life in their neighborhoods and the spending of their tax dollars.

The Board of Estimates, the Board of Municipal and Zoning Appeals, and the Board of Liquor License Commissioners represent some of the City's most influential decision-making bodies. The bodies make decisions on how taxpayer dollars are spent; on what businesses, homes for the elderly and disabled, and halfway houses are permitted in City neighborhoods; and on how many and where liquor and adult entertainment establishments can operate.

The rulings that flow from these three boards, as well as others, such as the Planning Commission, have far-reaching and long-lasting impact on communities throughout Baltimore. Broadcasting the meetings of the major decision making bodies of Baltimore City government will allow Baltimore City residents the opportunity that is their right to participate in the democratic process.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF BALTIMORE, That this Body will examine the logistical requirements for, and efficacy of, requiring that meetings and/or hearings of the Board of Estimates, the Board of Municipal and Zoning Appeals, and the Board of Liquor License Commissioners be broadcast on cable TV or webcast to provide greater transparency, accountability, and openness to the workings of government and to give a wider audience to Baltimore City citizens unable to attend government meetings in person.

AND BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That a copy of this Resolution be sent to the Mayor, the Honorable Members of the Board of Estimates, the Board of Municipal and Zoning Appeals, the Chair and Commissioners of the Board of Liquor License Commissioners, the Director of the Office of Cable and Communications, and the Mayor's Legislative Liaison to the City Council.

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