

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

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DATE: NOVEMBER 21, 2003

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: PHILIP SUNDERLAND, CITY MANAGER *PS*

SUBJECT: CLOSED CAPTIONING OF CITY COUNCIL MEETINGS

ISSUE: Closed Captioning of City Council Meetings.

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council allocate \$50,000 from the Non-Departmental contingent account set aside for this purpose to the Office of Citizen Assistance in order to enable the City to initiate closed captioning of City Council meetings early in 2004. The Alexandria Commission on Persons with Disabilities has worked with staff on the development of a closed captioning project for the City.

DISCUSSION: During the FY 2003 budget process Council set aside in a contingent account an amount of \$50,000 in order for the City to begin a program of closed captioning of City Council meetings. Councilwoman Woodson initiated this budget process allocation and requested that staff look into closed captioning and report back to Council.

Staff has met with representatives of the Alexandria Commission on Persons with Disabilities, Comcast and the National Captioning Institute, a local vendor with extensive experience in closed captioning municipal meetings as well as sporting, news and other television programs, to discuss closed captioning.

Closed captioning would enable Alexandria television viewers whose television sets are closed captioning ready (most newer television sets include this option) to view City Council meetings with real-time printed captions of what is being said at the meeting running at the bottom of the television screen. This captioning would be accomplished by a vendor who would have persons viewing the council meeting and inserting the necessary captions.

Working cooperatively with Comcast, the City has acquired the necessary cable television equipment (an EEG closed caption encoder) to enable the Council meeting broadcast to be transmitted from Comcast to the closed captioning vendor and then the closed captioning information would be sent to Comcast so that the closed captioning can be transmitted over the City's cable television system.

Closed captioning would enable persons who have hearing impairments to read the captions while watching the Council meeting. Closed captioning is also helpful to persons who are learning English, for whom English is a second language, or who wish to keep the Council meetings on but with the sound off.

I recommend that Council allocate the funds necessary to proceed with this project. I believe it will provide a significant benefit to the citizens of Alexandria. In June, once we have sufficient experience with closed captioning of City Council meetings, we will look into the possibility of expanding the closed captioning to other City meetings such as the Planning Commission and others

FISCAL IMPACT: We estimate that there are approximately 35 City Council meetings and public hearings in a twelve month period. The cost of a vendor to do the closed captioning will be about \$200 an hour and we project a cost of about \$40,000 per year, but since the exact hourly rate is not known yet, we recommend that the entire \$50,000 be allocated for this project. Any unexpended funds at the end of FY 2004 will be carried over for closed captioning purposes to FY 2005. Staff will either use an existing municipal contract or seek bids from vendors to do the necessary closed captioning early in 2004.

STAFF:

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