



CITIZENS UNION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
Testimony to the New York City Council Committee on Governmental
Operations on Int. No. 952 – requires City Record to be
published online and free of charge
April 28, 2009

Good afternoon, Chair Sears, and other members of the Committee on Governmental Operations. My name is DeNora Getachew, and I am the Director of Public Policy and Legislative Counsel of Citizens Union of the City of New York, an independent, nonpartisan civic organization of New Yorkers that promotes good government and advances political reform in our city and state. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee in support of Int. No. 952, sponsored by Chair Sears and, among others, Councilmember Brewer who has been a leader on increasing government transparency and access to government information.

Citizens Union believes it is not only timely but critically important that government take steps to make government more transparent, because doing so directly correlates to expanding the public's access to information about government performance and decision-making and ensures that citizens can hold their government accountable. We believe that efforts to provide more government documents online not only serves to increase transparency, but can also save government resources and time, because it would eliminate many of the formal and informal requests to agency personnel for basic information already provided in existing government reports and other documents.

Citizens Union supports Int. No. 952, which would require the Department of Citywide Administrative Services (DCAS), or a successor agency, to publish the City Record online, available free of charge and be updated at least daily. We applaud efforts to make the City Record – which importantly provides a single source for government notices and actions, such as public hearings, proposed agency rule changes, court notices, procurement actions and contract awards, similar to the other government publications, such as the New York State Register – available online and free of charge because it would move the City inline with other government publications and take a significant step towards producing greater transparency in government operations. This change would also make the publication better serve the public and, hopefully, encourage more citizens to provide input or comment on proposed government changes by allowing citizens to more easily access pertinent public notices.

The bill also mandates that hard copies of the City Record would continue to be provided to each borough president, council member, community board, branch of a public library, the municipal reference and research center and the news media on a periodic basis to be determined by the Commissioner of DCAS. These hard copies would also continue to be available for public inspection without charge. Our recommendation is that at the outset – at least until elected officials become used to accessing information through DCAS' website – that DCAS should print hard copies of the City Record on a weekly or even better bi-weekly basis, which we hope will ultimately become a monthly print publication. We are mindful, however, that our long term goal of printing hard copies of the City Record on a monthly basis may be impractical given that notice for many government actions requires

comments within a thirty day window. For now we believe that printing and distributing hard copies on a weekly basis would ensure that elected officials, the public and the media remain informed about important government actions in a timely manner to allow opportunity for comment, while also reducing DCAS' printing and distribution costs.

Citizens Union previously testified before the City Council's Committee on Technology in Government on this issue, recommending that the City Record be published online and that the Department of Records and Information Services (Records) become a "one-stop shop" of City government publications and information. We therefore recommend that the Records website ultimately host the online version of the City Record or at least provide a direct link for this service on its website. Records currently publishes government reports in the publications section of its website, and ideally should be a single source for those looking for a variety of information about City government, including public hearings, agency reports, rules changes, and other important news.

Additionally, we would like the City Record online proposed by this bill to be fully searchable and archived, and encourage the City to look at ways to make the service more automated and interactive by making available items such as e-mail alerts or RSS feeds for new postings and creating calendar subscriptions for public hearings or meetings. Citizens Union also recommends that DCAS work with Records and the City's Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications to ensure that the website is as user-friendly as possible, especially with respect to the layout and availability of past editions of the City Record.

Finally, the bill proposes that the City Records website be implemented in ninety days after enactment of the law. While Citizens Union is unprepared to speak definitively regarding whether this is a realistic timeline for the City to develop and implement this new website, we suggest that all relevant agencies will work with DCAS to satisfy the law's requirements, continue to work with DCAS or Records to update the site after its initial launch, and solicit user feedback on how to improve the site.

We urge the Council to promptly pass this legislation and consider further efforts to improve its implementation. Citizens Union appreciates the opportunity to share its views and would welcome the opportunity to work with the Council on ways to continue to improve public access to important government information.