



## Feasibility of a Transcription Service for City Council and Committee Meetings

**Date:** October 24, 2019  
**To:** Special Committee on Governance  
**From:** City Clerk  
**Wards:** All

### SUMMARY

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The purpose of this report is to respond to City Council's direction to investigate the feasibility of implementing accurate time-effective transcription of meetings of City Council and its committees, boards, agencies and special committees.

Implementing a Hansard-like transcription service is feasible but expensive and cannot be done with the Clerk's existing resources. A transcript would not replace the Minutes as the official record of Council proceedings.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

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The City Clerk recommends that:

1. City Council receive this report for Information.

### FINANCIAL IMPACT

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The full costs of a Hansard-like transcription service cannot be provided within the Clerk's existing resources. An estimated staff complement increase of 6 to 8 FTEs would be required. Estimated annual costs could be upwards of \$1 million, including projected staff costs of \$626,000 to \$708,000.

Additional costs will be identified should Council wish to pursue a transcription service.

## DECISION HISTORY

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City Council at its meeting on April 16 and 17, 2019, requested the City Clerk to report to the Special Committee on Governance on the feasibility of implementing a transcription service for meetings of City Council and its Committees:  
<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2019.MM6.15>

## COMMENTS

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### **A transcript would not be an official record of proceedings and would not replace the minutes**

Under the City of Toronto Act, the City Clerk is required to record, without note or comment, all resolutions, decisions and other proceedings of City Council, and to keep the originals or copies of all by-laws and of all minutes of the proceedings of City Council.

The City Clerk publishes the City Council and Committee minutes after every meeting. The minutes are a record of what was decided, not what was said. They constitute the official record of proceedings.

While a transcript could provide additional information about those proceedings, it would not replace the minutes.

### **We have evaluated the feasibility of a Hansard-like transcription service.**

A feature of many Westminster-style legislatures, the Hansard is a verified, edited, attributed and substantially verbatim transcript of legislative proceedings. It is accurate and often quickly available, and is usually produced by dedicated teams of transcribers and editors, working in collaboration with audio-visual and information technology teams.

### **Implementing a transcription service is feasible but expensive.**

A Hansard-like transcription service cannot be provided within the Clerk's existing resources. To transcribe meetings of City Council and its committees would require an increase of 6 to 8 Full-time Equivalent positions. There would also be information technology infrastructure costs, to be determined after further research. Technology costs would likely include a systems upgrade, new software, and increased captioning costs.

The annual salary costs would range from \$626,000 to \$708,000. This cost does not include the cost of transcribing meetings of City boards and tribunals. Extending the transcription service to these bodies would involve greater cost and complexities, as not all of them are supported by the City Clerk, and they do not all meet at City Hall.

These estimates are based on comparing the results of the jurisdictional scan in Appendix 1 against the Clerk's existing staff and technology resources.

### **Lower-cost alternatives would be inferior and not worth pursuing**

The added value of a Hansard-type transcript is the verification and editing of the text by specialized transcribers and editors, making it a reliable report and, in many jurisdictions, an official record of legislative proceedings.

Other options, such as publishing a raw or "cleaned-up" captioning transcript would still have associated costs. The costs would be lower, but would not produce a reliable record. The existing functionality of YouTube, makes it possible to access the closed captioning for meetings, extract the captioning feed and use the translation feature to translate the captioning into many languages.

In order for the investment into a transcription service to be worthwhile, the product should add clear value beyond what is currently available. Lower cost alternatives offer no benefit and are not be worth pursuing.

### **We have conducted a Jurisdictional Scan**

The City Clerk's Office conducted a jurisdictional scan of transcription services. The following jurisdictions provided information on their respective services:

House of Commons; Senate; Alberta; British Columbia; Manitoba; New Brunswick; Newfoundland and Labrador; Ontario; Québec; Prince Edward Island; Yukon; Nunavut and the City of Winnipeg

The jurisdictional scan focussed on Westminster-style jurisdictions that produce a verified, edited Hansard transcript.

Several USA cities, including Houston, Los Angeles, and Tampa, post their unedited captioning transcripts to their websites. The City of Philadelphia uses a court reporting service to produce its transcripts.

The results of the jurisdictional scan are included in Appendix 1 to this report.

### **The City Clerk makes the record of proceedings publicly available.**

The City Clerk's Meeting Management System provides public access to minutes, background information and open data sets. The City Clerk's Office routinely video-records, webcasts, and uploads the proceedings of City Council, Community Councils, and many Committees to YouTube.

Since its launch in 2014, the YouTube channel has had over half a million views, and monthly Council meetings generate from a few hundred to a few thousand views, depending on the agenda.

These recordings are captioned, indexed, and archived, and users may take advantage of YouTube functionality to extract the captioning transcript and to translate the captioning feed into many languages.

By providing public access to City Council proceedings, the City Clerk satisfies the legislated obligations of the office and also fulfills one of the office's primary services, to promote open government.

### **A transcript could benefit research, analysis and accountability**

A verified, edited, attributed transcript could be indexed and searchable. It could potentially aid in research and analysis by making it easier to search the record by keyword, and to attribute and search statements made by Councillors and public presenters. A transcript could work with accessibility readers and similar software which might have a small positive impact on accessibility and equity.

### **A transcript may impact on litigation related to statements made in Council and Committee proceedings**

The City Clerk has consulted with the City Solicitor on this issue. The City Solicitor will submit supplementary information on the matter.

### **There is no software available that could produce an accurate, attributed transcript**

Most jurisdictions with a transcription service use some kind of transcription software, either purchased or designed in-house, to manage workflow. In most cases, the software divides the audio input into short segments, allowing several people to transcribe different portions of a meeting at the same time.

Currently no jurisdiction routinely uses automatic voice-recognition software in transcript production. The technology is not yet mature and the programs need to be trained on individual voices. This poses a challenge in a multi-member setting. Some jurisdictions commented that any time savings from this technology are lost in the substantial editing time required to clean up the machine-generated draft. It is more efficient to transcribe from scratch.

### **Equity Impacts**

The City Clerk's Office provides equitable access to City Council information and documents. A transcript would constitute an additional means of making Council information available to the public. A transcript in a format compliant with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act could work with accessibility readers and similar software. It could allow the public to engage with Council proceedings without having to access high-speed Internet, which could have a low positive equity impact

## **Next steps to explore a transcription service**

If City Council wants to explore a transcription service, it could direct the City Clerk to prepare a business case for a transcription service for consideration in the 2020 budget process.

## **CONTACT**

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## **SIGNATURE**

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City Clerk

## **ATTACHMENTS**

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Appendix 1 - Jurisdictional scan