

Date: December 3, 2003

2003 DEC -3 PM 3:44

To: Chairperson Wan and Members of the Oakland City Council Finance and Management Committee

From: David Weiss

Re: Off-Site Real Time Closed Captioning Stenography Services

I am sorry that I am unable to attend the December 9 meeting of the Finance Committee. I routinely watch captioned meetings of the Oakland City Council and its committees on KTOP and I am impressed at the accuracy and consistency of the current on-site captioning services.

I am deaf, and regularly watch captioned television, both taped and live productions. As a Deaf person, I also make frequent use of interpreters and interpreting services. Regardless of what you might be told, there is simply no substitute for the services provided by a live interpreter or transcriber: the ability to see and understand who is talking is much greater when you are in the same room or at least are in close proximity to who is speaking. This is even more true when there are many and varied speakers, speaking with a variety of accents and mannerisms.

Most live television programs, such as the news or Larry King Live, rely upon off-site captioning services, similar to the service you are considering using. An off-site captioning, by person, with a limited number of clear speaking speakers, such as what you would have on Larry King Live, can do a decent job transcribing what is said. When presented with numerous speakers, perhaps with heavy accents, speaking quickly or randomly, as occasionally happens on live or taped news stories, the quality of interpretive services diminishes drastically. It is easy to assume that the penalty to a transcriber of being off-site from the meeting being transcribed is a loss of at least 10% of what is said, in all likelihood it is greater.

Don't take my word for it. Before voting on this item, I ask that you watch local news with closed captioning switched on (KTVU at 10pm is a good example). While the anchor is delivering the news with a steady and even voice, you will get fairly decent transcription although even that will not be verbatim. But when the discussion becomes more lively, perhaps with persons being interviewed on tape or talking via phone or coverage of a live event with many distractions, captioning suffers or stops completely.

When you consider the fact that the televised captioning is the only way Deaf and hard of hearing persons have to listen to Council meetings and the wide array of discussions that take place at those meetings, it is crucial that the service be capable of correctly relaying all that is said at the meetings. Although your staff

report mentions that San Francisco reports 99.87 % accuracy with their captioning, you don't explain what that is based on. The implication is that 99.87% of every word spoken at a San Francisco board meeting is accurately transcribed and captioned. When you consider that certified court reporters' required accuracy for certification is 96% at 180 words spoken per minute in a courtroom, it is highly unlikely that offsite captioning, by persons who in all likelihood are not court certified transcribers, can achieve 99.87 accuracy.

Even if off-site captioning correctly transcribes 90% of what is said at a Council meeting, (and I doubt it will be that good) who can know what information will be lost to the Deaf and hard of hearing viewer? I ask that next time you or other members of the City Council engage in thoughtful discussion, that you randomly not speak 10% of the words you were preparing to say. Only when you are comfortable with the conversation that ensues could you then be comfortable switching to off-site captioning.

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FINANCE & MANAGEMENT CMTE.

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