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Councillor Craig Chung gets transparency out of City of Sydney. Photo: Vanessa Lim

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By Vanessa Lim

Access to live recordings from the City of Sydney Council meetings will soon be at the tips of your fingers.

Live streaming of public Council meetings is now required by NSW Law, dragging a reluctant City of Sydney in its wake.

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The City of Sydney’s meetings will “go live” from October, and they will not only be available to watch live, but also be accessible after the meeting has ended.

Liberal Councillor Craig Chung has been a vocal advocate for live streaming of the meetings.

“I have been pressing for more transparency at the City of Sydney Council since elected in 2016,” Cr Chung said.

“I have moved motions on at least 10 occasions to introduce live streaming of Council meetings.

“All have been rejected by the Clover Moore Party.”

With 28 councils in New South Wales already live streaming their public meetings, the City of Sydney has been a late adopter of the technology.

A spokesperson from the City of Sydney said “At present the City of Sydney’s Code of Meeting Practice does not permit the video recording or broadcasting of Council and Committee meetings”.

“City Council meeting minutes are currently recorded by minute takers in hand written notes.”

But handwritten notes are not enough to satisfy Sydney locals like Andrew Woodhouse.

When asked for his feelings about Lord Mayor Clover Moore’s assertion there is little public interest in live streaming council meetings, Mr Woodhouse said “She’s out of touch, and we should at least trial it for 24 months”.

“I believe that live streaming is necessary for openness, transparency and accountability to make council responsible to ratepayers,” Mr Woodhouse said.

Mr Woodhouse’s statement validates Cr Chung’s effort in arguing for live streaming for the past 2 years.

Cr Chung said “The City of Sydney is far behind the rest of the country, and the world, when it comes to live streaming...some councils have broadcast their meetings since the 1980s”.

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When Cr Chung was asked about the benefits of live streaming meetings he said “The positive impact is that councillor’s behaviour will be on show to the world and they will need to be accountable for the way they vote and the way they behave”.

The experience of sitting in live council meetings for the public isn’t always a good one, especially for the faint of heart.

Talk of councillors behaving badly during meetings isn’t new, and observer Mr Woodhouse says he knows all too well why meeting participants might not want to be under scrutiny.

When asked about potential behaviour changes from councillors, Mr Woodhouse said “They’d behave more professionally and show a bit more decorum, some of the meetings I’ve attended have been like a rowdy school yard fight”.

Even without the expected improvement in councillors’ language, Mr Woodhouse said he believed the public, the staff and the council could benefit from live streaming meetings and that Council public transparency should be priority for locals.

The Monday 2pm start of council meetings often isn’t a convenient time for potential observers, who may be busy with children, work or other activities.

Providing a record of the council meeting for members of the public to access in their own time could advantage rate payers who aren’t able to watch meetings in person or live.

Cr Chung claimed there would be very few downsides to live streaming.

“There are some minor issues to do with privacy and ensuring that all those present at a Council meeting are aware that it is live streamed and will be broadcast,” he said.

The Councillor said the problem would be easily fixed by notifying the crowd in advance that meetings would be broadcast, and that the amount of money needed to live stream was compensated by the benefits that the public would reap from live streams.

Central Coast Council has paid a one-off fee of \$3000 to set up its live streams.

“The City of Sydney has a budget of \$680 million per annum.

“The cost to introduce live streaming is negligible compared to the benefits of transparency and access,” said Cr Chung.

Mr Woodhouse said: “It is a small price to pay for democracy and it’s nothing compared to the \$150 million dollars Council has in its bank account sitting there earning very low interest on a rainy day”.

“The Council will better relate directly to rate payers and residents that can’t make these Council meetings at odd hours.

“It better bonds and engages more with the people that elected them,” he said.

The NSW Local Government Act states, “Councils should actively engage with their local communities, through the use of the integrated planning and reporting framework and other measures”.

Supporters of the live streaming plan say its implementation will encourage further engagement with local communities, and may inspire locals to participate in future meetings.

“The idea is aligned with the Local Government Act’s requirements of openness and democracy,” said Mr Woodhouse.

