CHOOSING AN APPLICATION FOR EFFECTIVE VIRTUAL PUBLIC MEETINGS

Virtual meetings are new to many of us. Municipalities may understand the reasons to hold them, but also want to be sure that the meetings are productive, and are presented professionally. At the same time, there may be uncertainty over which meeting application is best for the municipality. Some, like Zoom and Webex, are probably familiar, but there are others that might suit a municipality’s needs and budget. Rather than providing an evaluation of many application providers (which is available online), we’ve listed important features for the municipality to consider when choosing an application. The municipality should consider trying a few conferencing service applications before committing to a particular one. Also, it is critical that the municipality’s IT staff be involved in the evaluation process, as they understand the municipality’s current system, and will be providing support before and during the meetings.

COST

What good is a virtual meeting application if it is far above the available budget? The municipality should consider its budget range for obtaining virtual meeting services, and evaluate the options within that range. Most providers offer several levels of service. The lowest cost may not be the best fit for the municipality, as there may be limitations on meeting length or number of attendees. Be aware that services can be priced based on the number of hosts (good for webinar-type presentations), or attendees (better suited for collaborative meetings).

WEB AND VIDEO CONFERENCING FEATURES & CAPABILITIES

- **Audio and video quality:** The quality of audio and video is important. So is the ability of your system to handle multiple users (bandwidth).
- **Scheduling meetings:** Users can schedule meetings in advance and contact staff members when needed.
- **Participation:** Joining the meeting, muting and unmuting should also be simple.

As a starting point, it is key for agencies to remember that transparency builds trust, especially in times of crisis.

—Eric Arneson

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Municipalities are authorized to hold virtual meetings, where practicable.
- A quorum is still necessary, but does not need to be in the same room.
- Advance public notice must be provided.
- The public must be able to participate.
- Emergency meetings are allowed (minutes of these meetings must be posted within 20 days).
NOTE:
“Practicable” is a much stronger word than “practical.”
(Merriam-Webster defines “practicable” as “capable of being put into practice or of being done or accomplished; feasible.” In other words, unless it is actually impossible to do so, it must be done. This means that advance notice and public participation are essentially required.)

RESOURCE LINKS
Public Input.com

- Recording: Meetings can be recorded, saved, or downloaded. Be aware that these files can be quite large.
- Security: Meetings can be password protected, and allow attendees to enter only after being identified.
- Other: Many software products also allow live chat, audience polling, Q&A, and file sharing.

ADDITIONAL CAUTIONS AND CONCERNS
- Chat function: The chat function is a valuable communications tool, but it needs to be monitored by an assigned staff member to avoid side conversations, arguments, and inappropriate comments.
- Meeting ‘hijacking’: More than an annoyance, virtual meeting hijacking can become a serious problem, perhaps even a crime. Software should allow for a meeting password or have a waiting room feature to control the admittance of guests.

LEGAL CONCERNS
Act 15 of 2020 (formerly Senate Bill 841) went into effect on April 20. Chapter 57, Subchapter E, authorizes local government agencies to hold remote meetings during the Covid-19 emergency. Some of the key provisions include:

- A physical quorum (i.e., a quorum all in the same room) is not needed. However, there must be a quorum participating remotely.
- Municipalities must provide advance notice of all virtual meetings, either on their website or in a newspaper, or both. Use of other methods for notice is encouraged.
- Municipalities must provide for public participation at the virtual meeting, via email and/or via postal mail.
- If an emergency meeting (i.e., a meeting called without public notice) related to COVID-19 takes place, the minutes of that emergency meeting must be made available within 20 days or before the next regularly scheduled meeting, whichever is earlier.

THINK TOWARDS THE FUTURE
We can’t be sure what municipal operations (or life in general!) will look like as we come out of this pandemic. The ability to work from home has helped many projects and day to day operations continue relatively uninterrupted. Virtual public meetings have helped maintain continuity of programs and projects. Although many people agree that there is no substitute for a face-to-face meeting, it is likely that these new aspects of municipal operations will continue to some extent.

The virtual meeting application selected by the municipality can assist with the transition to post-pandemic operations. With staff working in the office and working from home, virtual communication will be essential. Not just public meetings, but departmental coordination meetings, client meetings, and project updates can all take place virtually over the application selected by the municipality. With a little practice, virtual meetings will become a natural way of doing business.