

PUBLIC MEETINGS

EFFECTIVE VIRTUAL PUBLIC MEETINGS



HOW TO HOLD MUNICIPAL PUBLIC MEETINGS DURING SOCIAL DISTANCING REQUIREMENTS

It's a municipal elected official's nightmare: holding a meeting out in the public that gets out of hand. The causes can range from an individual who won't stop talking, to a group of individuals who have organized an unanticipated disruptive protest. Now add to the scenario that the attendees aren't all in the same room, but are at homes scattered across the municipality. It's enough to cause the municipality to think twice about virtual public meetings.

However, online or virtual meetings enable municipal work to proceed and can enhance public outreach, even after in-person meetings resume. Consider that evening meetings don't work for everyone, and also that these tools can be used to collaborate better within departments, with other departments, consultants, and applicants. With forethought and practice, the municipality can hold virtual public meetings that are effective and productive.



Virtual public meetings may increase public participation

Once the municipality decides to hold a meeting, uncertainties regarding running a virtual meeting, resident unfamiliarity with technology, and limits on time and meeting size can limit productivity and affect meeting outcomes. The information and additional links provided here can help start the municipality gain an understanding of the legal framework, technical resources, and best practices for holding successful, effective public meetings.

Here are some general suggestions for municipalities to consider:

- **Make sure the meeting is mobile compatible:** According to Pew Research Center, 81 percent of Americans currently own a smartphone. Digital outreach efforts should be mobile app compatible, to enable residents to connect via phone. Making mobile hotspots available to residents can supplement mobile phone internet services.
- **Manage expectations:** Standardize public engagement practices so stakeholders always know what to expect.
- **Overcome the in-person bias:** Be aware that lack of face-to-face contact might make participation feel less engaged, so make an effort (such as addressing people by name, or active listening) to help participants understand that digital communications are no less genuine.
- **Don't Go It Alone:** Communicate with your community groups and ask their input on how you're reaching out. Is there a need for translation services, or perhaps closed captioning?



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Virtual public meetings can provide continuity of operations during the pandemic
- The work done in preparing for the virtual meeting will help it run smoothly
- Be prepared for greater public participation, and anticipate their needs

GUIDELINES FOR ATTENDEES JOINING YOUR VIRTUAL MEETING

Inform attendees that the meeting will be recorded

Keep microphones muted when not speaking

Speak slowly and clearly to be heard

State your name before you speak each time

Limit questions during a presentation... there will be at the end

Use chat or raise hand tools for questions

“Just because we shifted to a work-from-home environment doesn’t mean that work stops. It’s not fair to property owners or businesses or developers to put the brakes on and halt everything. So the number-one consideration that went into the decision to transition to online meetings was continuity of government services.”

– Director Emily Mack
City of Indianapolis’ Department of
Metropolitan Development

RESOURCE LINKS

Public Input.com

<https://blog.publicinput.com/covid-19-tools>

Moving Planning Commission Meetings Online During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Big-City Perspective,

<https://www.planning.org/podcast/moving-planning-commission-meetings-online-during-covid-19-big-city/>

PSATS summary and analysis of Act 15 of 2020, <http://psats.org.s97340.gridserver.com/ckfinder/userfiles/files/Act%2015%20of%202020%20Analysis.pdf>

Planning, June 2020: Concerns with Public Meetings, <https://www.planning.org/planning/>

Planning, June 2020: Considerations When Moving Public Meetings Online, <https://www.planning.org/planning/>

Knowledgebase Collection - Online Public Engagement, <https://www.planning.org/knowledgebase/onlineengagement/>

- **Take advantage of new opportunities:** An online meeting can attract a large audience. Digital platforms allow participants to respond when it’s most convenient for them.
- **Be discerning:** Social distancing doesn’t mean everything has to go digital. Phone interviews, mailed surveys with postage-paid return envelopes, and similar methods are still viable.



Virtual meetings can increase public interaction

PREPARING FOR THE ACTUAL MEETING

- Prepare a script, or at least a strategy. Establish a format for public meetings and follow it (it can differ based on the type of meeting, but each meeting of the same type should be conducted in the same way), so that the public knows what to expect.
- Designate the hosts (who control screen sharing, muting and unmuting)
- Assign duties to those not hosting:
 - Monitor the ‘lobby’ to admit people
 - Monitor length of time for comments
 - Monitor the ‘chat’ to keep it focused



Use the tools provided to manage participants

- Will the meeting be recorded? This makes preparing minutes easier, but be aware recording a virtual meeting produces a large file.
- Consider that webcams allow participants to see body language. Ask all attendees to turn on cameras, if they have them.

OPENING THE MEETING

Begin the meeting with an introduction about the process and participation:

- Attendees should remain muted, unless speaking
- Speakers need to self-identify before sharing comments
- Board comments, votes will be taken by roll-call.
- Repeat often how community members can participate
- Speak slowly and deliberately, for potential streaming delays
- Have technical stall available to troubleshoot

CONCLUDING THE MEETING

- Before the meeting concludes, have the meeting chair read into the record a “statement of findings” so it is clear on the record what was decided and voted on.
- Indicate how the minutes will be made available, and when.
- Make a final statement closing the meeting, to end the public record.