

Massachusetts Municipal Association **MMA BEST PRACTICES SERIES** Recommendations for Effective Local Government Administration and Management from MMA Policy Committees

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MMA Policy Committee on Municipal and Regional Administration

Best Practice Recommendation: Strategies for Choosing a Successful Meeting Format

BEST PRACTICE: Develop, adopt and disseminate standards and guidelines for remote participation prior to any remote or hybrid public meeting. Consider technology, staffing, space and expectations when determining which meeting format — in-person, remote or hybrid — would best fit different municipal meeting needs.

Pandemic-related changes to public meetings laws have allowed for the advancement of both remote and hybrid meetings in many municipalities. It is clear, however, that a one-size-fits-all approach to municipal meetings is a disservice to meeting members and the general public. Determining what interest and capability a public body may have can effectively guide which approach to take in order to best meet the needs of both the public and the municipal body. An understanding of all mechanisms will enable the body to be flexible when needed. No matter which meeting format is chosen, it is important that municipal bodies clearly communicate the format, guidelines and expectations for participation prior to meeting.

The following are some considerations:

1. What technology is available? Video and audio are important components of both hybrid and remote meetings. While remote meetings may rely on individual technology components, hybrid meetings will require both video and audio access throughout the space. Both remote and hybrid meetings will require a platform (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc.) that is free for the public to access. Remote and hybrid meetings will also require some technology knowledge by members, including screen-sharing ability. Translation and closed-captioning should also be considered. When possible, consider recording and posting the meeting.

2. What staff is available? Remote and in-person meetings may require a single moderator/facilitator. Hybrid meetings may require at least one additional staff member to facilitate and integrate remote participants with those in-person. The chair should be prepared and knowledgeable on technology and meeting facilitation needs. Also consider whether on-site technical staff is available to support technology needs and troubleshoot problems that may occur in hybrid meeting formats.

3. What physical space is available? Some cities and towns have invested in remote or hybrid meeting technology for one or more municipal spaces. Municipalities will need to consider both the body member and public attendance in determining the space needed for hybrid and in-person meetings. While infinite remote meetings can occur at the same time, hybrid and in-person meetings will need to consider schedule requirements for the physical space.

4. What are the expectations of the members? Many municipalities have seen an increase in board participation via remote meetings because they accommodate work and child care needs, as well as other accessibility needs. Though this may be beneficial, in-person meetings may be expected for planning boards or other entities that require site visits or documents that may be difficult to access in a hybrid or remote format. It's important to ensure that members understand the rules and expectations, including what happens if one or more members lose their internet connection to the proceedings.

5. What are the expectations of the public? Remote and hybrid meetings have increased public participation and furthered government transparency in many public bodies. However, many municipalities hold more than 30 different board meetings monthly, and not all municipal meetings have generated (or are likely to generate) much public interest. Consider whether the public needs in-person access to a remote meeting, essentially requiring a hybrid format. Also consider whether the meeting should be broadcast on local access television. It's important to ensure that the public understands the rules and expectations.

Resources:

- Civic Plus: <u>10 Best Practices to Enhance Your Public Meetings</u>
- Metropolitan Area Planning Council: <u>Shared Practices for Engagement in Virtual Meetings</u>
- Massachusetts Department of Transportation: <u>Guidelines for Successful Virtual Public</u> <u>Meetings</u>
- KP Law: Open Meeting Law: Overview and Practical Considerations for Public Entities
- Massachusetts Select Board Association webinar: <u>Technology and Staffing Needs for</u> <u>Remote and Hybrid Public Meetings</u>
- National League of Cities: Making Public Meetings Accessible to All