



Remote Participation Study Committee Draft Meeting Minutes

Date: October 26, 2021

Time: 7:30pm

Location: Conducted by remote participation

Minutes

Committee Participants:

Mustafa Varoglu, Chair

Jennifer Susse, Co-Chair

Stacie Nicole Smith, Secretary

Alexander Bagnall

Janice Cagan-Teuber

Jim Feeney

Eric Helmuth

William Hayner

Liaison from Finance Committee: Annie LaCourt

Members of the Public: Elizabeth Dray

Agenda:

1. Review and accept meeting minutes from Oct 12, 2021 meeting
2. Public Comment
3. Town Boards and Commissions Survey status and next steps.
4. Public Engagement with RPSC Survey Discussion
5. Identify additional sub-topics important for Remote Participation Meetings.
(Technology, legal and other resources in Town) and existing external resources or guidelines used by other towns or entities for hybrid meetings.
6. Future meeting schedules and timeline to Select Board Report and potential Warrant Article Drafts.
7. Any other business

Decisions Reached and Action Items:

- Minutes were approved

- Update website charge and contact information
- Jen continues analysis of committee survey to share with committee for next meeting
- Stacie finalizes public survey with Eric and Rachel, send to all to distribute through your channels
- Bill offered to set up a field trip for the School Committee room.

Summary of Discussions:

The Chair introduced Annie LaCourt, a non-voting observer from the Finance Committee. After discussing technological challenges, the committee voted to approve the meeting minutes from the last meeting.

The Public comment period was shortened due to lack of outreach. Elizabeth Dray noted that the website did not have contact information for the committee nor info on who was the Chair, and asked to have this fixed. She asked about whether assessing ways that public bodies provide information to the public about their work was part of the charge, since this was not listed on the website. The Chair clarified that this item is part of the charge and that this would be changed on the website. The Chair suggested that the charter and goals be sent to the town to clarify this, and planned to send the document. Jim agreed to fix these on the website. Eric noted that he had the clerk's document with the final vote/form of the charge, and would email it to Mustafa. Elizabeth then voiced concern about a comment from last week that the focus of the committee be on access rather than active participation, when she saw it as being about the public being able to participate in a hybrid manner.

Town Boards and Commissions Survey status and next steps

Jennifer noted that late-breaking responses made analysis of the Town Boards and Commissions survey more difficult, and that the open ended questions made analysis more complex and time consuming. She indicated that she'd would make her working document available along with her analysis. She listed a handful of committees she had not yet heard from, and the plan to continue her analysis. Mustafa suggested setting up a time for them to talk to prepare for the next meeting.

Later, the group noted that it might be helpful to organize meetings into sizes, types, and formats, and try to understand how many simultaneous meetings might be taking place. Note that going forward, one of the recommendations might be around scheduling for locations that are more suitable (ex, Lions room too difficult), and guidance to prioritize those spaces.

Public Engagement with RPSC Survey Discussion

The group jumped into discussions on the draft survey for the public. On the question about video recordings, they suggested more clarity on what we want to learn, and suggested rephrasing the question.

Elizabeth suggested adding a question asking people how they get their information from the town/public bodies.

The group made some additional tweaks to the draft and agreed that Stacie, Eric, and Rachel would finalize and send the final version to the group to circulate.

Addition Topics, Committee Charge, and timeline

The group discussed how they would proceed with their work, and suggested that the next meeting would focus on the analysis from the committee member survey, that the following meeting would analyze the public survey findings. They noted that they should seek any legal input on possible warrant articles between mid-Nov and Dec, and complete the report for the Select Board by Jan 15, including an outline of any draft warrant article. (It was noted that the Select Board had the ability to insert articles after the deadline.) Additional recommendations could be addressed later, as the committee has until Town Meeting to complete their work.

The group discussed what recommendations might require a warrant article. A member asked whether a by-law would be needed in order to allow hybrid meetings. Others responded that these could occur without a by-law but that one might be needed if hybrid meetings were to be required. It was noted that the Select Board could make rules about Select Board committees and the School Board could make rules about its committee, so maybe only Town Meeting committee rules would need to be passed by Town Meeting. Members warned of enacting by-laws that were too stringent, since it could create problems if technology failed, or budgets were not in place to support those rules. They suggested that any by-laws be more generic. A participant suggested that the committee might even bring a non-binding resolution. Questions about policy vs by-law are topics that might be discussed with the Town Attorney.

The group then discussed recommendations in the form of best practices, and what those might mean. Members suggested that the group might suggest creating a manual for how to run good hybrid meetings, and/or provide suggestions and recommendations. This might be a good way to respond to the Committee's task around "assessing ways that public bodies provide information to the public about their work." Where to store minutes, when to have them, how to use zoom. Have a recording of how to use the virtual tools and play it at meetings.

Discussions on the Group's Scope

The group talked about each of the topics within their scope, including the following key points:

- A. Evaluating the benefits and challenges of providing hybrid forms of public meetings;
 - On webinars, it's difficult to know who else has attended the meeting as you can in a public meeting. Is there a way for attendees to see a list of other participants in the "webinar" setting of zoom? – this can be useful to bring people with a common cause together.
 - Is there a way to know who is present in person and electronically whether you attend in person or remotely?
 - Is there a way for people to "sit in the back" anonymously electronically?
 - Limited # of rooms that can be set up for full hybrid
 - Assessing which public bodies can and should provide remote participation
 - Finance Committee does not allow public participation unless invited specifically
- B. Examining what portions of meetings can and should be available for remote participation
 - Expect to observe the meeting during periods when public participation is not available at the meeting.
 - Don't currently show public participants on the screen

- C. Determining what, if any, local rules beyond legal requirements can and should be established for remote participation
 - Can write a letter to change state law to not require chair or quorum be in person, or ask SB to do that.
- D. Understanding the costs of different models of remote participation, especially hybrid remote participation
 - Identifying rooms that are hybrid ready – different capabilities for different types of meetings
 - What is ARB doing for sharing plans and maps.
 - Remote presence monitors for remote participants.
 - Audio controls to prevent feedback.
 - Rooms with “Meeting Owls” for small group meetings
- E. Evaluating the impact of remote participation on accessibility requirements and concerns.
- F. Assessing ways that public bodies provide information to the public about their work.
 - Identify best practices to provide to committees and boards
 - Ideas: Standard presentation, scripts, setup directions
 - show participants how to use mute, record, captions, maybe have a cheat sheet, or video of how to participate
 - We need to somehow make sure that these don’t disenfranchise people with disabilities - Mass office of Disabilities has a script to address these issues
 - What safety features should be employed in all meetings.

The group discussed if there were models from other towns for our work. A member noted examples of a few towns that have set up some rooms for hybrid, like Natick and Franklin. Franklin has one monitor for presentations and another for remote presence, with positioning so participants can see both. It has multiple cameras, audio controls, and software that ties it together with Zoom. The Town of Stowe is using 2 technologies – Meeting Owl, and one with screen on wall, for small groups.

The group noted an interest in seeing what the rooms that are set up for hybrid already look like – the School Committee and Select Bd rooms. Bill offered to set up a field trip for the School Committee room.

Future Meetings

The Committee’s next meetings are noted below, all at 7:30-9:30.

- Weds Nov 10,
- Tues Nov 30,
- Tues Dec 14,
- Tues Jan 4

Report to Select Board due by Jan 15.

The group adjourned at 9:45