



Remote Participation Study Committee Draft Meeting Minutes

Date: November 10, 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
Bill Hayner
Liaison from Finance Committee: Annie LaCourt

Agenda:

1. Review and accept meeting minutes from Oct 26, 2021 meeting
2. Public Comment – 15 minutes
3. Public Engagement with RPSC Survey Update - 10 minutes
4. Town Boards and Commissions Survey Results – 10 minutes
5. Presentation by Maxwell Palmer regarding participation in remote meetings – 20 minutes
6. Summary by Jim and Alex on technology and rooms – 20 minutes
7. Strategy and timeline to generate Select Board Report – 30 minutes
8. Any other business - 10

Decisions Reached and Action Items:

- **Minutes were approved.**
- **Disseminate public survey to your networks**
- **Pull together initial findings-to-date from Public Survey for review at next meeting**
- **Begin work on sections of Select Board Reports**

Summary of Discussions:

Town Boards and Commissions Survey Results

Key findings:

- People generally thought that remote participation had many benefits, especially for board members. There was a lot of interest in hybrid but also a significant amount of worry about how it would work.
- When we asked for feedback on concerns about possibly transitioning to hybrid meetings for their boards, commissions, and committees 49 respondents (34%) replied they were not concerned about going to hybrid or were actively in support of the hybrid meetings, another 8 respondents (6%) were in favor of keeping meetings all remote and 5 respondents (3%) requested to go back to in-person meetings only.
 - Reminder that OML requirement will require a quorum in person for all meetings. We would need the legislator to change that
 - We can recommend requests to legislators to change that requirement. This could come from Select Board, as a Town Meeting resolution, or possibly work with others, like the Mass Municipal Commission.

Public Engagement with RPSC Survey Update

- Eric spent a lot of time reducing the reading level for the intro down to grade 11. Make the outreach easy to read. Important if we care about equity and access.
- 82 responses so far on social media, leave open to Dec 3, and reminder will go out in advance of that.
- Quality of responses is good – thoughtful comments.
- Need extra help disseminating! Janice, get disability commission. Jen send to housing authority through union/tenants association. PTOs – Bill? Eric send to committee chairs. Jenn send to everyone who responded to the survey and ask for help in getting this out.

Presentation by Maxwell Palmer regarding participation in remote meetings

Maxwell Palmer joined the meeting to speak about his recent research on participation demographics in virtual meetings. In the last 5 yrs, his team read public meeting transcripts and tracked who was participating in housing-related meetings, and found that those who participate are unrepresentative of the public - they don't have the same views, and want different outcomes. This is also true about public surveys. Lesson: the voices you hear are not necessarily representing the demographics of the population.

A working assumption of virtual meetings was that it helps with equity, and that more people can participate. They had expected more people showing up. Last year, he studied Zoom meetings, and found almost no differences in who participates. The same people who always show up. But he also found that virtual meetings aren't discouraging participants, and that even older people are participating at the same or higher rates.

Participants asked how this could be fixed. Palmer noted that the City of Newton is doing focus groups with explicit demographics groups different than those who usually show up at meetings. These are often led by someone within that demographic group. Some places are experimenting with paying people to participate.

Hard to know why so few people go to public meetings. Many people think not worth their time, not convenient. In Arlington, convenience seemed to make a difference – parking, etc. A participant noted that for meetings of the Rotary club, there was a big increase in attendance.

Similarly, in the survey of Town committees, those that usually have public participation have had more people show up, whereas those that don't, still don't.

Frequently, the people showing up are opposing something. Or, with a series of **charrettes** that were offered, supports came to create the design, then the opposition showed up afterward.

It's not just about people feeling their voice matters. On housing, the people who benefit aren't part of the conversation – affordable housing, those who will benefit don't yet live there and are not informed about it, whereas those who oppose get abutters notifications. Does it feel worth it? Might not. Status quo builds in response bias.

Be clear that zoom presents an opportunity for more participation and more diverse participation, but it is not a silver bullet. Examples: In the current redistricting process, emails and speakers are 95% neg., but surveys indicate people are more OK with it. However, even surveys show a large skewing in participation. For example, an analysis of a survey for modernization committee of Envision Arlington, 80% of people answering the survey said they voted in local elections. (Envision Arlington statistically analyzes the data to correct for participation bias)

Summary by Jim and Alex on technology and rooms

Looked at Select Board room, complex tech. 4 zoom cameras, each has microphone, single audience mic. 2 monitors, sound bar, HDMI inputs, for laptop running the zoom and someone running the presentation, need 2 people. Small audience monitor. Requires staffing. ACMI manages it. High end of what we do, very labor intensive.

Lyons Hearing room, didn't see an easy way to put permanent tech – would need more of a moving cart situation.

Take-aways:

- If invested in equipment and centralized into ACMI, maybe they could deal with more meetings at once, more easily.
- Maybe more than just the Select Board uses the Select Board room.

- Library has invested in Meeting Owl, \$1000. Recently ran a book club in person of 6 and remote 3. Only ideal for small setting gathering around a conference room. Less for panel/audience style meetings. Some missing links – lack of in room monitor or projection, means lack of visibility of remote participants, not ideal. Need big monitor, good audio and sound bar.
- Need simultaneous access to information, and to see and hear each other. Moderating a larger meeting in a hybrid format – really challenging to do really well without the “gold standard” in SB and SC chambers.

We should write out the range of use cases. Ex: Select Board, a lot of public participation. Finance Committee, no public participation but committee members benefit from remote meetings. We can draw these examples from the committee survey.

- There are a set of simple solutions that will probably work for the majority of our committees. All the ACMI committees, another 10 or so where there is greater interest from the public - Park and Rec, Zoning Brd of Appeals – more downloads than any other around Thorndike/Mugar, drew in significant public interest (usually opposition). Historical Commission, usually not much attendance, but controversial renovation, significant spike in interest. Use Cases we can tackle, so we don’t need gold standard for each
- Keep in mind the money that can be saved if we don’t have to pay our experts/consultants to sit through entire meetings, plus their travel time.
- Which committees, which mode, what topics. CPA committee only when public hearings on projects. Committees will have to know when they will need which infrastructure.

What are the simple additions for other spaces? Pull down screens, ex.

Expand strategic fleet of rooms. Match use cases with rooms/technologies

- Outfit new main hall in Arlington community center. Two there. (previously, Senior Center). Wired with cable, audio loops, means of projection (monitors better than projectors). Need capability of captioning – software.
- Community room in basement of library

Submitted a Grant to Mass Office on Disability, to remove barriers to participation in public spaces. To target the Senior Center, technology to allow all to participate in meetings from home. Disability Commission meets there.

Alex, Jim, work on estimate of costs. Offer concrete recommendations on which rooms, which tech, which meetings (~67% of meetings less than 10 people, etc...). Annie – help with use cases and infrastructure.

Strategy and timeline to generate Select Board Report

Proposal for an **Executive Summary style report** (2 to 3 pages) with further data gathering, analysis and recommendations presented to Town Meeting to April 2022

- Ideas we have discussed in previous meetings can be basis for the Select Board Executive Summary style report – for comments, feedback, additions...
 - RPSPC Endorsement of hybrid meetings after April 2022
 - Phased roll out of hybrid meetings based on available technology and equipped rooms
 - How many rooms fit for which meetings at which times?
 - RSPC identifies first phase of meetings to go hybrid (need buy-in from first meetings)
 - Identify what type of staff or volunteer technical support this first phase needs
 - Leverage ACMI if possible, staffing and scheduling Town employees if that's the choice
 - Would using a consulting firm help us on how to set this up and run it.
 - Running training for committee chairs
 - Are there appropriation requests we should make to the Finance committee to have funds available to fund hybrid meeting rooms following 2022 Town Meeting
 - Hardware, Zoom subscriptions,
 - Advocate for learning from first phase of roll out.
 - Advocacy to legislature to allow changes to meetings – allow quorum to be established hybrid or full remote after April 2022 – letter from RPSC or Select Board
 - What can be done now, vs. what we might ask Town Meeting (Warrant)

Dividing up the Tasks (initials)

Proposed dividing the Charges above between 2 to 3 people and have each group send in brief text (bullet points OK) based on survey results from board members and the public and our previous meetings' discussions.

This first pass of content will be reviewed and discussed at Nov 30 meeting to provide support for Executive Summary.

- A. Evaluating the benefits and challenges of providing hybrid forms of public meetings; (SS, AB)
- B. Assessing which public bodies can and should provide remote participation; (BH, AL)
- C. Examining what portions of meetings can and should be available for remote participation; (BH, MV)
- D. Determining what, if any, local rules beyond legal requirements can and should be established for remote participation; (MV, - code of conduct, intent of town, civility,

- E. Understanding the costs of different models of remote participation, especially hybrid remote participation; (AB, JF, EH)
- F. Evaluating the impact of remote participation on accessibility requirements and concerns. (JS, JCT)
- G. Assessing ways that public bodies provide information to the public about their work (JCT, JS)

Budget – technology as well as personnel. Help desk? Zoom subscriptions could be significant, all the other costs. Ask companies – maybe hire consultant for training, operate. Can committee chair/staff run the remote operation and take the notes?

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.

Weds Nov 10

- Identify a strategy to assign report sections among separate teams of authors

Tues Nov 30

- Each team shares their first draft, solicit comments and identifies need for additional information.

Tues Dec 14

- Comments and additional information incorporated by teams into their sections
- First complete draft of report
- Assign a small group to make edits and harmonize report

Tues Jan 4

- Review and fine tune report during meeting or

The group adjourned at 9:45