The Remote Participation Study Committee sent survey questions to 64 of Arlington's boards, commissions, committees, and active subcommittees in mid-October of 2021, with follow-up reminders sent a week later. We received responses for all but four--140 responses in total representing 60 boards, committees, and commissions in Arlington. We also sent responses to two committees that have been disbanded—the Complete Count Working Group and the Design Working Group. We have removed those committees from the statistical analysis below but kept the committee members' narrative responses to the open-ended questions.
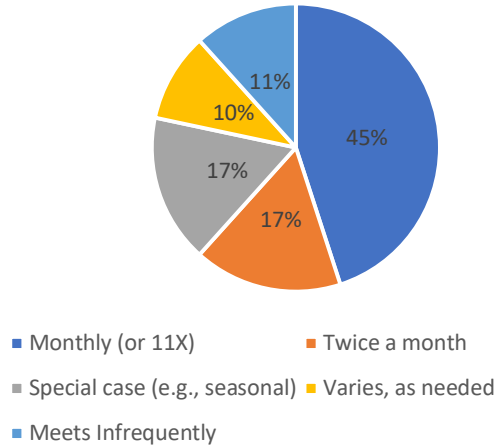
Most boards, committees, and commissions (47 or 78%) met in a fixed location prior to Covid-19. Nine, or 15%, moved from location to location, and four (7%) did not meet prior to Covid-19. The vast majority, 50 or 83%, have a Town or School staff member who regularly attends their meetings.
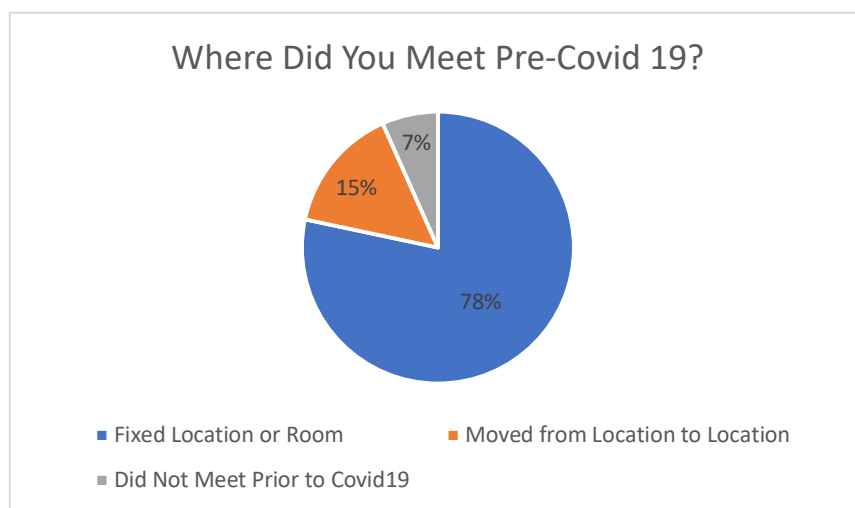
Besides the Select Board and School Committee rooms, the most common rooms used were the Lyon's Hearing Room in Town Hall, the First Floor and Second Floor of the Town Hall Annex, the Community Room at the Library, and two spaces in the Senior Center (now known as the Arlington Community Center). Occasionally the conference room at the Public Safety building was used as well. With the opening of the Arlington Community Center there are now two newly renovated spaces with improved acoustics and an operable partition that can divide the hall into two separate meeting rooms, each with their own Audio/Visual infrastructure.

Almost half (27 or 45%) of Arlington's Board's, committees, and commissions meet monthly, or nearly monthly (several take a month hiatus in the summer). Ten, or 16%, meet twice a month, with 16 (27%) meeting either seasonally or as needed. Seven, or 11%, of the board's, committees, and commissions meet infrequently.

How Often Do you Meet?

- Monthly (or 11X) — 45%
- Twice a month — 17%
- Special case (e.g., seasonal) — 17%
- Varies, as needed — 10%
- Meets Infrequently — 11%

The majority of boards, committees and commissions in Arlington have fewer than 10 members who regularly attend, with half (30 or 50%) reporting between 6 and 10 members and a quarter (14 or 23%) reporting fewer than five members. A fifth of the Boards, Committees and Commissions have more than 10 members (12 or 20%) and a few are special cases, such as Envision Arlington Task Groups which have no fixed membership. Note that there was some confusion among respondents as to whether to count Arlington staff as "members" and whether to count the number of official members or the number of members who attend regularly.

Number of Members

- 1 to 5 Members — 23%
- 6 to 10 Members — 50%
- 11 to 15 Members — 13%
- 16 to 20 Members — 7%
- Special Case — 7%
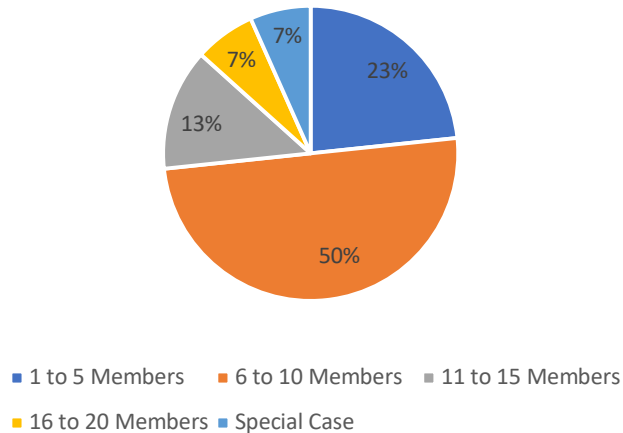
Public Attendance, Participation, and Engagement

A significant number (52 or 87%) of Arlington's boards, committees, and commissions have had some meetings where members of the public have attended, presented, or participated. The majority (29 or 49% of the total) report that meetings where members of the public attend are rare and typically involve only a handful of community members when they occur. However, 13 (22%) of the boards, committees, and commissions have had some meetings with more than 10 members of the public in attendance, with five reporting having had some meetings with more than 20 members of the public in attendance. Those Five include Envision Arlington's task groups, the Historic Districts Commission, the Redevelopment Board, the Select Board, and the Zoning Board of Appeals. The School Committee and the Parks and Recreation Commission have also had a few large meetings, albeit less frequently than the five committees mentioned above.
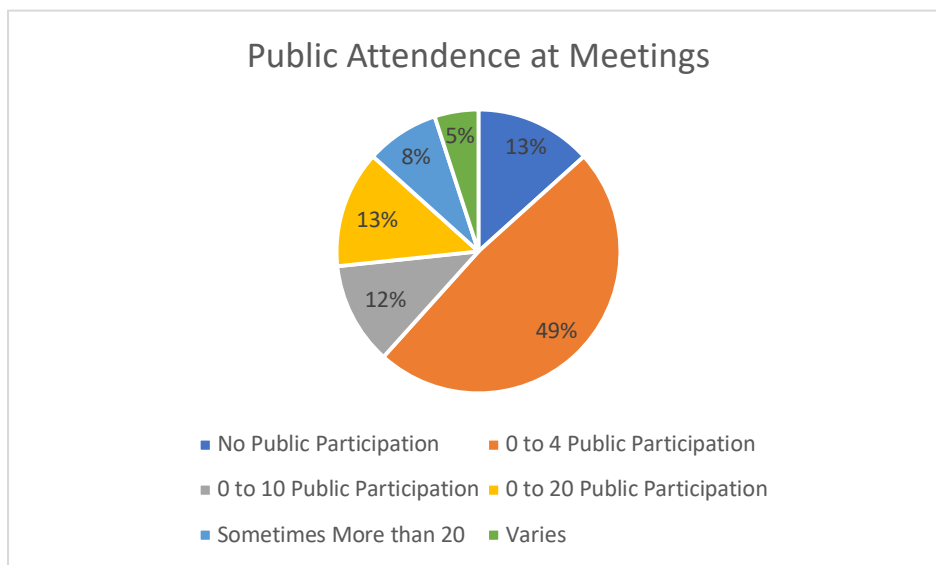
Many respondents noted that levels of participation were mostly a function of the agenda rather than the format. As one respondent noted, "after, as before, people turn out to participate when something is going on that they care about. So the best ways to grow participation may have to do with organizing and sharing information, more than technology."

While many of Arlington's boards, committees, and commissions saw a similar level of attendance and participation when their meetings moved to a remote format, some saw notable increases. One respondent wrote, "We get a lot more visitors since we have been remote. Prior to Covid-19 attendance by non-committee members was sporadic and sparse. During Covid-19, attendance by non-committee members has increased at each Zoom meeting." Another noted that "I have seen so much more resident engagement in meetings and personally have been able to attend multiple meetings per evening and have attended meetings I wouldn't have attended in person as I was too busy, bad weather, family obligations." However, at least one member of the Historical Commission

claimed that public participation was more robust in person and a member of the LGBTQIA+ Rainbow Commission pointed out that in person meetings afforded discretion for community members who do not wish to "come out" in the more public setting of Zoom. At least one committee saw a decrease in participation, likely reflecting a lower-levels of interest in the committee's agenda rather than any issue related to the remote format

Many respondents liked the formal nature of remote meetings, where both committee members and members of the public participate by raising hands and taking turns being called on. However, some worried that people show up "differently" in remote formats, were concerned about a perceived decrease in civility, or had complaints about the "cumbersome" nature of Zoom. Several respondents wrote favorable about the benefit of public interactions through the chat function on Zoom.

It is important to point out that even in a remote environment many respondents report that the majority of public interactions with Arlington's boards, committees, and commissions happen as they have in the past over email, by phone, and for some committees by Facebook.

Benefits to Board, Commission and Committee Members

While there was less consensus as to whether remote meetings increased public participation and engagement there was a strong sentiment that remote participation made it easier for the members of the board, committee or commission to participate and that member attendance has increased since moving to a remote format. Many respondents pointed out that remote access allows people to attend who wouldn't otherwise be able to because of weather, travel, family obligations, or mobility issues. These sentiments were expressed especially by members of the Disability Commission, Equal Opportunity Advisory Commission, the Diversity Task Group, and Parks and Recreation

Others noted difficulties they had when meetings were in person: meeting room space was sometimes hard to book, some rooms had acoustical issues or were undersized for their needs, and most rooms lack basic technology such as white boards, markers, or flip boards, not to mention the ability to display slide decks, record meetings, or have a conference call.

A common sentiment was to both acknowledge the benefit of in-person meetings but then go on to point out how much easier it is to do board business without the stresses of having to make it to an in-person meeting. E.g., one respondent wrote, "I really miss in-person meetings in terms of the personal interaction. I don't miss the time spent driving back and forth, finding parking, and getting into the building. People comment that they can make our meeting because it's on Zoom; they wouldn't be able to if they had to come in person."

Members of the Disability Commission unsurprisingly had thoughtful comments about remote participation for their members. I think it valuable to quote a couple of those comments directly:

- "Commission members with disabilities will be allowed to participate fully if their disability prevents them from being physically present due to flair-ups, weather conditions or transportation issues. They are still participating and up to date on Commission business."

- "Our traditional meeting location is not accessible for those who have significant mobility impairments. Sometimes it was hard to find parking and get into the building (Senior Center), and especially when the back door of the building was locked before 4pm. Since I have some mobility issues, it was frustrating to not be able to park and enter the building consistently."

Materials

42%, or 25, of Arlington's boards, committees, and commissions always share materials at their meetings, a third (20 or 33%) sometimes share materials, and a fifth (13 or 22%) do not share any materials at their meetings. 2. Two committees reported that they did not share any materials prior to moving to remote participation, but now do.
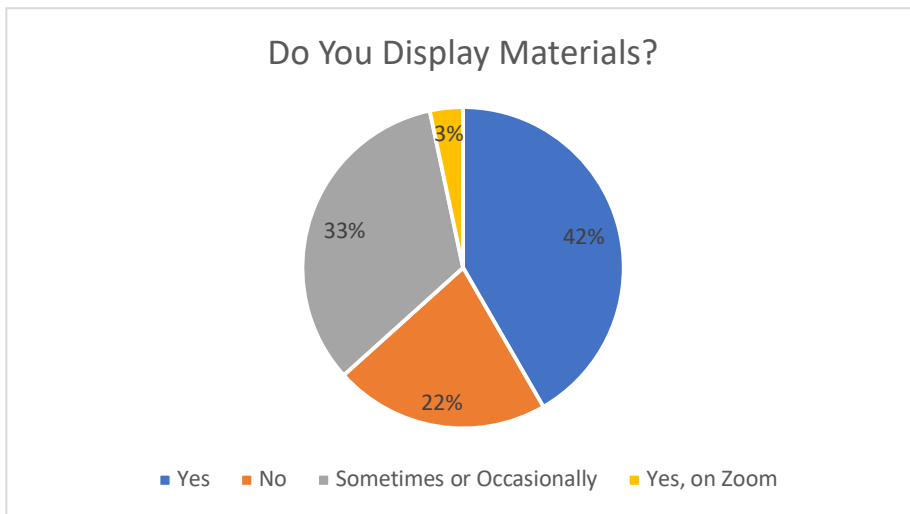
The materials shared include the agenda, meeting minutes, committee reports, slide decks, spreadsheets, diagrams, site plans, and brainstorm boards. Many reported that the shared materials were sent to members before the meeting, though only in a few cases does the public have access the same materials prior to the meeting. Both members of the Historical Commission and the Zoning Board of Appeals note that the ability to present information has improved with remote meetings, because "during in-person meetings, we often lacked equipment to show plans and documents." On the other hand, one member of the Redevelopment Board reported that the remote presentations "have been more difficult and taken longer without the use of physical large format plans," and noted that board members miss out by not being able to review samples of building materials.

Changes People Would Like to See

We asked survey respondents what they would like to see when the remote meeting legislation expires in April 2022. Respondents talked about wanting to meet in spaces that are large enough for their members and any public who attends, that are fully accessible, well ventilated, and with reliable internet connectivity, as well as having the technological capacity to display information or present slide-decks.

Some expressed the hope that they could continue to meet fully remotely, though most admitted that the state may not give us that choice. Most respondents would like to see a hybrid option, and many expressed the concern that were we to go back to entirely in person meetings that member attendance (or their own attendance) would drop. One person speculated that allowing members to participate remotely may both "result in a larger pool of future board members," as well as "more public participation."

Some survey respondents identified issues they would like to see addressed that are unrelated to the issue of remote or in person meetings. For example, starting meetings on time, a commitment to sending documents electronically prior to the meeting, more timely posting of minutes, and a code of values. As one respondent noted, "I would like to see the committee (perhaps all public boards and committees) adopt some values and guidelines around civil discourse and productive use of meeting time to encourage productive, civil discussions, to keep meetings on topic and to discourage unnecessary conflict and uncivil exchanges."

Concerns about Going to Hybrid Meetings

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.

The most cited concern about hybrid meetings is that by mixing together in-person attendees and remote attendees that engagement would suffer (noted by 46 respondents, or 32%). Respondents want to ensure that there is a "uniform experience for all, so that those participating remotely don't feel sidelined." There was a concern that online participants "might not hear everything correctly or might not be able to as easily speak-up." On the other hand, in-person participants might be excluded from any on-line chat. Several suggested that changes in meeting etiquette and proactive efforts would be needed to ensure board members and public attendees would stay engaged with each other during meetings regardless of their location. Other argued hybrid meetings are the worst of both worlds and that "the half in/half out is challenging and unsatisfying."

The next most frequently expressed concern (40 respondents, or 28%) was a fear that technology difficulties would make meetings challenging and unproductive. Respondents expressed both the concern that the technology wouldn't work well enough to provide "a consistent experience for both live and remote attendance/participation" as well as the concern that hybrid meetings would be too difficult to manage.

Several respondents offered suggestions for how to make hybrid meetings work, with some suggesting that they work better when members of the public are in listen/view mode, and others expressing frustration with meetings where the remote participants cannot see "who is in the room" and cannot chat with other attendees.

Some respondents have tried hybrid meetings at work and noted that it was difficult to hear all participants and display presentation materials for all to see. As one person wrote, "since I work in a school, I've been part of this kind of interaction – it is very difficult to manage and make sure that those who are remote are recognized and can easily participate. The problem is getting a whole room of people to be visible and be able to see the Zoom people."

Another common concern was the worry that hybrid meetings would place an additional burden on the meeting chair or facilitators (13 or 9%), concerns as to whether rooms would be available that had the appropriate technology or training to use the technology (8 or 6%), and worries that sharing materials would be difficult (7 or 5%). There were additional concerns that any in-person attendance—either all in person or hybrid—has public health risks, citing specifically the lack on ventilation in many of the usual meeting spaces. Disruptions (e.g., Zoom bombing) and concerns about costs were among the least mentioned (with 4 and 2 respectively noting these concerns). Finally, it is important to note one respondent's concerns that were the town to "cherry pick" only some meetings for hybrid participation that would in effect mean that only some meetings would be accessible to people with disabilities.

Feedback on concerns on going to hybrid meetings in future

Category	Number of responses
No response	9
Unfamiliar/ Unsure with hybrid meetings	3
No concern about going to hybrid meetings	36
In Support of Hybrid	13
In support for viewing/ listening not participating in hybrid	2
Keep all remote	8
Go to all in person	5
Covid spread once in person	6
Fear engagement will drop wihout remote	4
Availability of rooms with capabilities	8
Engagement: everyone being seen and heard by everyone (remote or in person)	46
Technology: ensuring audio and video are available and work	40
Burden on moderator/ chair	13
Burden on people with disabilities or ESL	1
Sharing Presentation Materials	7
Training to run hybrid meetings	2
Cost for purchasing technology	2
Cost to make Town staff with expertise available	2
Disruptive online people (Zoom bombing)	4

Thoughts on Meeting Types

Obstacles to Successful Meetings