

**Public Input on Town of Arlington Virtual/Hybrid Meetings
Summary of Survey Findings
DRAFT**

The Remote Participation Study Committee disseminated a 10-question survey between November 8 and December 3 to collect public input on needs and priorities for ongoing remote access to meetings of Town boards and committees. The committee received responses from 354 people. The following report summarizes those responses.

Question 1:

Have you observed or participated remotely in Town of Arlington board, commission, or committee meetings?

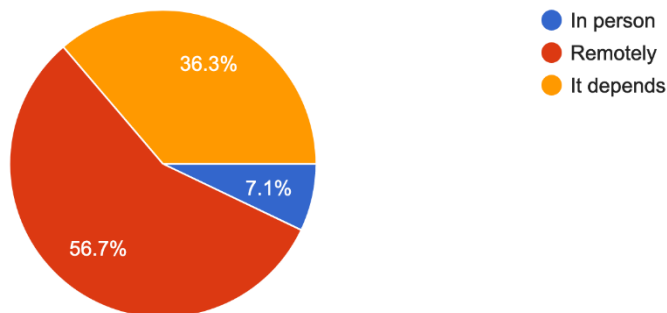
354 responses



Question 2:

Given the choice, how would you typically prefer to observe/participate in the Town's public meetings?

353 responses



Question 3: If it depends, what factors might lead you to prefer remote vs. in person or vice-versa? (184 responses)

The most frequent factors cited for preferring remote access included:

- Safety and health concerns (state of Covid situation)
- Ease of remote access vs. physical attendance (e.g., challenges of childcare, transportation, parking, mobility, seating, weather, ability to multi-task)
- Desire or opportunity to simply observe (e.g., meetings where no active participation is desired or available)
- Limited time availability – many noted that evening meetings are difficult to attend in person but possible remotely, others noted that daytime meetings conflicted with their work schedules. Several noted considering the length of the meeting and the timing for discussion they wished to join.

The most frequent reason commenters would choose to attend in-person was to participate actively and/or be heard, particularly if these opportunities were limited to or prioritized for participants in the room. Many felt that their input would be more meaningful or persuasive if they presented in person. Other primary factors named that might lead to a preference for in-person participation were:

- High priority topics or meetings
- Certain meeting purposes: desire to interact with committee members and/or other attendees, build relationships, engage in civic dialogue, or focus on topics that require group work
- Lack of personal technical resources (no computer, limited or no internet)
- Poor quality remote access (can't see what is being presented or hear well if remote, too tightly controlled such that public access is limited)

Question 4: What do you see as the primary benefits and strengths of remote participation in public board and committee meetings? (331 responses)

Enables participation by more people

A majority of respondents cited a lower threshold to observe or actively participate in Town of Arlington meetings. Many said they've observed and participated remotely in many more public meetings than before the pandemic when all public meetings were in person. A few respondents cited the ability of remote technology to scale up to potentially very large numbers of observers or participants for a given meeting.

Allows for more inclusive and diverse participation

Beyond increased participation in general, many respondents specifically cited the potential for this lower threshold of participation to increase accessibility to people

from marginalized groups who often experience barriers to attending in-person meetings.

Respondents frequently named these benefits that reduce the threshold for attending and participating in public meetings:

- Reduced or eliminated barriers due to physical disability or illness.
- Elimination of travel, weather, parking or transportation access as barriers.
- Reduced or eliminated child/elder care requirements.
- Reduced time commitment to participate – people can tune in only to the portion of meetings they care about, and it's less burdensome to wait for an agenda item of interest to come up when attending remotely.
- Ease in incorporating remote attendance around personal and family schedules.
- Ability to observe meetings anonymously.
- Greater ease in contributing public comment for those who are less confident about speaking at public meetings in person.

Benefits to meeting quality

Respondents commonly named specific advantages to the quality of meetings, beyond expanded and more diverse participation:

- It can be easier to see and hear meeting participants remotely than in person, both live and in recordings.
- It's often easier for all observers to see visual presentations over remote.
- Remote meetings tend to be more civil; Easier to manage disruptive behavior by remote attendees. *(Note: Other respondents said that remote meetings have instead fostered more incivility. See Question 5, below)*

Increased government transparency and visibility. Several respondents pointed out that increased public participation and observation in public meetings fosters greater awareness of how local government works and what it's doing.

COVID safety. Several respondents mentioned reducing the risk of exposure to COVID by attending more meetings remotely.

Question 5: What do you see as the primary draw-backs or obstacles to remote participation in board and committee meetings? (305 responses)

Note: Some responses to this question clearly applied to remote-only meetings (for example, that people without technology access are excluded from meetings). Since all-remote

meetings are not an ongoing option for the Town under current state law, those responses are not summarized here unless they also apply to hybrid meetings.

Operational Challenges

Many respondents acknowledged that for all the benefits, remote meetings and especially hybrid meetings incur new burdens. Specific elements commonly cited include:

- Costs for acquiring, configuring and maintaining effective technology.
- Significant difficulty of doing hybrid meetings well; they are not as smooth as all-remote meetings and have more points of failure.
- Delays and/or frustrations from technically inexperienced remote participants or from technology problems.
- More complicated procedures and rules are necessary for hybrid meetings, which requires a significant commitment on the part of committee leadership, membership and staff to learn how to effectively run the meeting.
- New tasks during the meeting for the board/committee leadership and staff may require additional roles and resources

Meeting Quality

Respondents also commonly mentioned the potential for lower quality meetings when many participants are attending remotely:

- Less interpersonal connection and nonverbal communication;
- Loss of opportunities for informal side conversations or new collaborations with other residents.
- Longer meetings due to more remote participants and the added operational complexity.
- Increased incivility and disruption by remote participants who are more motivated to contribute unconstructively than when in-person. (*Note: As noted in Question 4, other respondents said that remote meetings have instead fostered more civility*)
- Missed nuances and the “sense of the room” that are easier to capture in person, leading to a lower quality of discussion and a higher potential for misunderstanding and miscommunication.
- Potential for a large number of public participants to overwhelm or dominate a public meeting.
- Some meeting materials (e.g. large maps, models) are easier viewed in person.

Challenges to ensuring equal experience of remote and in-person attendees

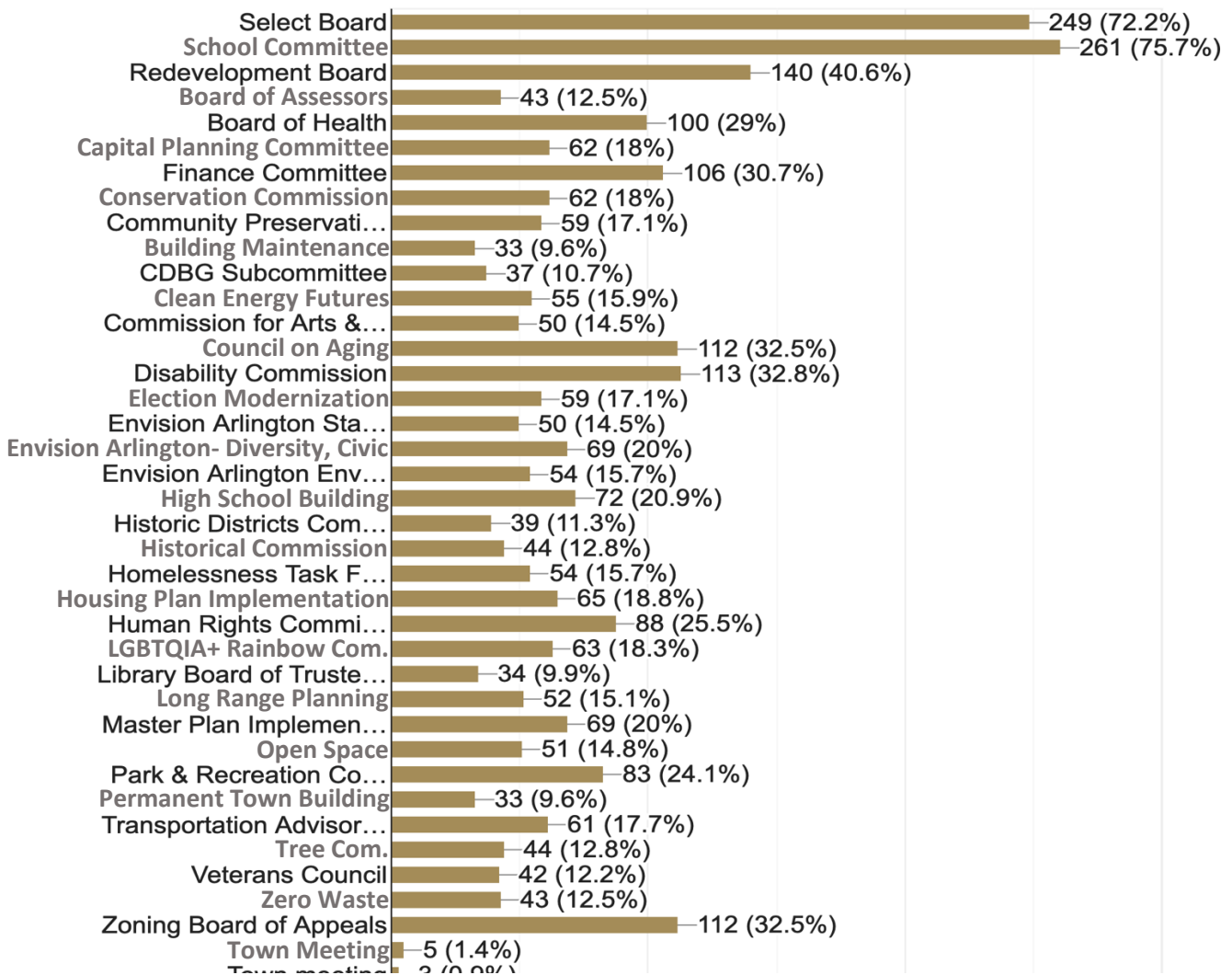
- Potential for remote participants to not be treated equally to those in the room, for example in being noticed and recognized by the chair.
- The presence and voice of remote participants could be felt less than those attending in person.
- Remote participants often cannot see who else is attending remotely (e.g. in webinar mode).
- More difficulty in calling attention to yourself when you're attending remotely, compared to people in the room.

Question 6: Which Town Boards and Committees do you see as the HIGHEST priority for providing remote public access for observation and participation? (you may check more than one) (345 responses)

The committees that ranked highest in priority for providing remote public access for observation and participation were the School Committee and Select Board, followed by the Redevelopment Board, Zoning Board of Appeals, Council on Aging, Disability Commission, Finance Committee, and Board of Health. More detail is available in this graph.

Which Town Boards and Committees do you see as the HIGHEST priority for providing remote public access for observation and participation? (you may check more than one)

345 responses



Question 7: Videos of Select Board, School Committee, Redevelopment Board, and Finance Committee are available through ACMI. If meeting videos of other boards and committees were to be available in the future, which meetings do you see as the highest priority for public recording and posting?

62 percent of the survey respondents (221 out of 355) offered their thoughts as to which meetings they believe are the highest priority for public recording and posting beyond the four that are available at ACMi (Select Board, School Committee, Redevelopment Board, and Finance Committee). However, about of third of those who responded (72) either mentioned committees that were among those four or said that they did not want additional meetings to

be recorded. As one respondent noted, “those are enough for me, to be honest.” Ten percent of those who responded (22) said they would like to see all, or as many as possible, of the boards, committees, and commissions recordings available, and a few (6) suggested that perhaps committees could self-select which meetings to record depending on public interest in the agenda.

While some respondents gave general comments on the types of meetings they would like to see recorded and saved—e.g., “Environment and Diversity”, or “Anything that spends my property tax” many did request recordings for particular committees. By far the most requested committee (with 34 call-outs) was the Zoning Board of Appeals. The survey sent to committee members supports the claim that there is a lot of interest in this committee, likely due to its role in reviewing 40B proposals

The second most requested committees, with between 12 and 17 call-outs, include the following: Board of Health, Council on Aging, Envision Arlington and its Subcommittees, Transportation Advisory Committee, Disability Commission, Park and Recreation Commission, Capital Planning Committee, and the Housing Plan Implementation Committee. Those calling out subcommittees of Envision Arlington mentioned the Diversity Task Group, Civic Engagement Group, Fiscal Resources, and Environment.

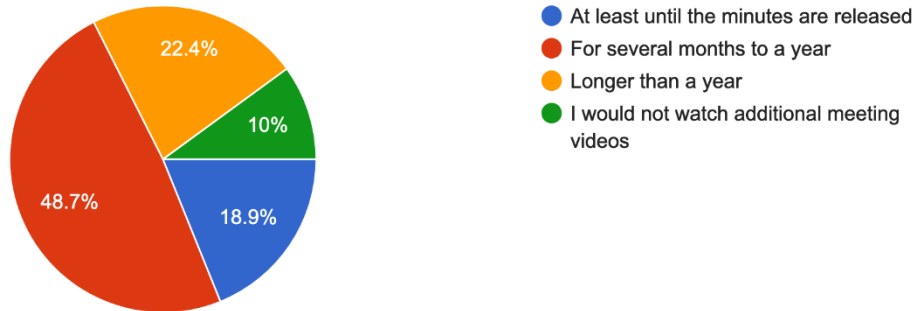
Interestingly, when we surveyed members of the above mentioned committees only members of Envision Arlington, Park and Recreation Commission, and the Transportation Advisory Committee noted that they receive any amount of public attendance and participation at their meetings, with the other commission and committee members claiming that either they seldom have members of the public attend their meetings, or that they regularly have only one or two members of the public attending. Of course, members of the public may still wish to view recordings of a meeting without wishing to attend or participate in that meeting.

Committees receiving between five and eight mentions include: Conservation Committee, Human Rights Commission, Long Range Planning Committee, CDBG Subcommittee, Community Preservation Act Committee, High School Building Committee, the Master Plan Implementation Committee, and the now disbanded Zoning Bylaws Working Group. The Housing Authority, which isn’t under the aegis of the town, received 10 call outs. All the rest of the committees received fewer than 3 mentions.

Question 8:

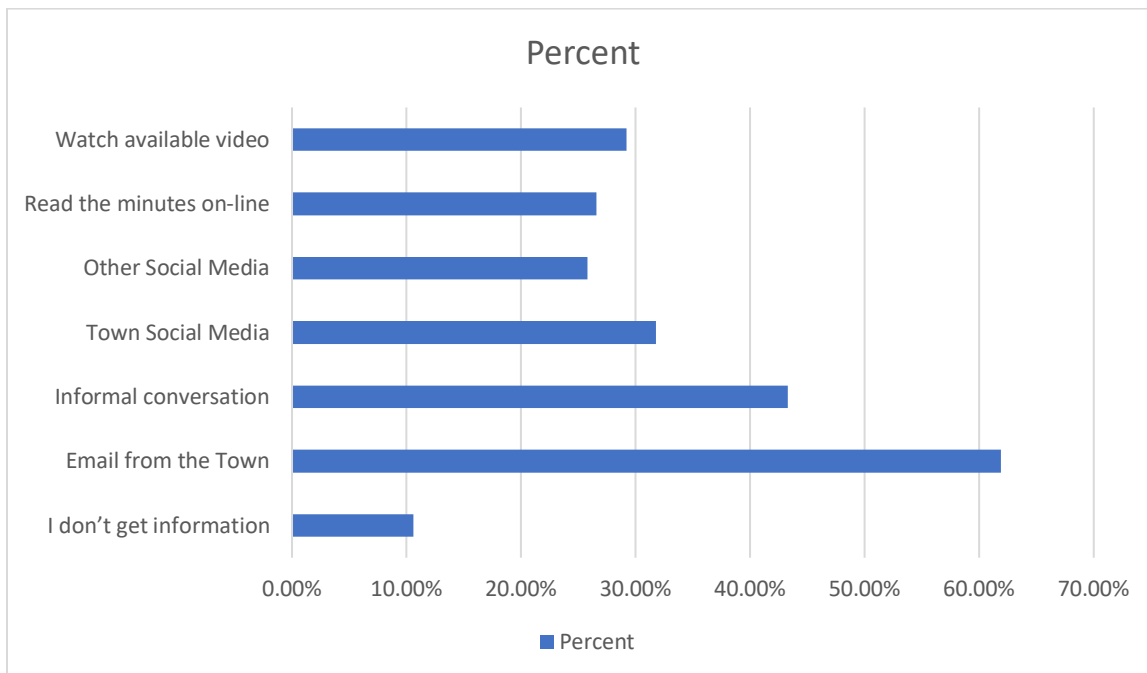
If you would view additional public meeting recordings, how long would you want those videos to remain available?

339 responses



Question 9: How do you typically get information about what is going on in a specific town committee or board meeting that you are interested in? (349 responses)

(all others under 1%)



Question 10: Any other advice or suggestions for the Remote Participation Study Committee on recommendations for remote public access to meetings? (123 responses)

Many respondents took this opportunity to highlight how important they thought retaining remote access to meetings was. A few people expressed concerns about remote or hybrid meetings, such as how to ensure parity of remote participants and allowing interaction among participants (and in the community in general). There were concerns that remote meetings allowed for too much stifling of public comment and/or needed to add more opportunities for participation (such as polls) and allow sharing of faces or audio. Suggestions included investing in the staffing needed to facilitate and manage hybrid meetings effectively. Some respondents suggested it was time (or post-pandemic would be time) to wish to end or limit their use.

Additional points of advice included: a request that this survey not be the other source of public input, engaging in more outreach to residents with disabilities to offer access to remote meetings, getting advice from experts, assessing impacts on balance of input, engagement of public and committee members; standardization of rules for remote participation (chat, video, etc.), holding trainings for how to participate remotely, including outreach to seniors; clarity in agendas, objectives, and materials; adding timelines and transcripts to videos; and better dissemination of meeting minutes.

Survey Respondents who Haven't Participated or Observed in a Remote Meeting:

We were curious how the answers of the nearly 20% of survey respondents (69 out of 354) who haven't participated or observed a remote meeting over the past year and a half differed from those who have. After all, those respondents are people in town whose voices the boards, committees, and commissions are not hearing from, or at least are not hearing from recently.

Those who have not participated or observed a remote meeting preferred to participate remotely, in person, or dependent on circumstances in similar numbers as those who have had experience with remote meeting participation, with a slightly greater preference for in person (10.1% vs. 7.1%) meetings. The reasons they cited for their preferences, e.g., health, transit, or childcare considerations, and their views on the advantages and disadvantages of hybrid participation were similar to the responses from those who have attended meetings remotely. For example, some worried that in person attendees would "drown out" those participating remotely or that "remote participants may be easily overlooked or ignored."

Many of the respondents who hadn't attended a meeting remotely were familiar with town structure, governance, and meeting availability, indicating that they may have participated in or attended in-person meetings in the past. However, nearly half of the respondents (32 out of 69) indicated that they don't get any information about meetings in town that they are interested in or that they receive information only through informal channels (conversations with neighbors or non-town social media). Only about half indicated that they receive information through more "official channels"—town emails, town social media, or the Arlington Advocate.

In noting which town boards, committees and commissions they would rank high for remote participation or would like to see recordings of, those who have not attended a meeting remotely were more likely to offer more than 5 committees or to say that they value all meetings equally. For example, 4 out of the 7 who requested that all meeting be recorded were among the respondents who indicated that they haven't attended a meeting remotely.

Of those who reported not receiving information about town meetings a couple requested that information be posted on their building's bulletin board, potentially indicating that we were successful in reaching residents of the Arlington Housing Authority, as they use bulletin boards heavily.

We believe that the 69 respondents to the survey who have not attended a meeting remotely in the last year and a half represent a significant group in town who want to be more informed about meetings and town governance. As one respondent noted "I would like to observe remotely. I would very much like to know when town meetings are held and how to sign up to observe." Ideally the town will take some of this feedback to heart and strategize about ways to be better at outreach.