

Remote Participation Study Committee

Interim Report to the Select Board, January 2022

Introduction

The Remote Participation Study Committee (RPSC) was created as a result of a positive vote on Article 40 during the 2021 Arlington Town Meeting and convened on Sept 29, 2021. The RPSC was charged to consider the following items:

- A. Evaluating the benefits and challenges of providing hybrid forms of public meetings
- B. Assessing which public bodies can and should provide remote participation
- C. Examining what portions of meetings can and should be available for remote participation
- D. Determining what, if any, local rules beyond legal requirements can and should be established for remote participation
- E. Understanding the costs of different models of remote participation, especially hybrid remote participation
- F. Evaluating the impact of remote participation on accessibility requirements and concerns
- G. Assessing ways that public bodies provide information to the public about their work

Following consideration of the items above, the Article directed the committee to

1. Provide a report to the Town Clerk and Select Board on or before January 15, 2022 to:
 - i. Make ranked recommendations with respect to remote participation policies in the Town of Arlington; and
 - ii. Offer any recommended Town Meeting warrant articles for inclusion on the 2022 Annual Town Meeting Warrant; and
 - iii. Offer any recommended actions that the Select Board can immediately take under its own authority that do not require the necessity of a bylaw or the additional appropriation of funds not available in the current budget.
2. The Committee shall provide a final report to the 2022 Town Meeting on all the subjects listed above.

The Remote Participation Study Committee members and their appointing bodies are Mustafa Varoglu (Chair, Town Moderator), Jennifer Susse (Vice-Chair, Town Moderator), Stacie Smith (Secretary, Town Moderator), Alex Bagnall (Town Moderator), Janice Cagan-Teuber (Disability Commission), James Feeney (Town Manager), Bill Hayner (School Committee), Eric Helmuth (Select Board), Rachel Zsembery (Redevelopment Board). Annie LaCourt serves as a non-voting liaison from the Finance Committee.

This is an interim report. Before the 2022 Town Meeting the Remote Participation Study Committee will develop guidelines for best practices for remote participation, including suggested rules and procedures for conducting hybrid meetings and recommendations for additional technology purchases and staff time. This additional material will be presented by the Remote Participation Study Committee to the 2022 Spring Town Meeting. A final report will be presented to the 2023 Spring Town Meeting reviewing what we've learned from the meeting members and public attendants who have piloted hybrid participation.

Ranked Recommendations

1. The Select Board and School Committee should authorize, encourage, and support remote access to allow hybrid participation for meetings held by any boards, committees, and commissions under their purview. Such authorization would allow these meetings to be conducted in a hybrid format with both in-person and remote participants.
2. The goal of hybrid meetings should be to create conditions under which members of the boards, committees, and commissions and members of the public who are remote have parity of experience, including equal access to any audiovisual materials that are available to in-person attendees. To the extent feasible, committees should have equivalent participation opportunities for in-person public attendees as for remote public attendees and should clarify their policies in advance. They should also have policies outlining their to any technical failures. The Remote Participation Study Committee will offer examples of guidelines that committees may choose to adopt. Training and staff support may be needed for members of Arlington's boards, committees, and commissions to learn how to provide the best possible parity of access for remote and in-person attendees.
3. The Town should invest in locations and technology to enable hybrid meetings in 2022 for the following committees: Select Board, School Committee, Redevelopment Board, Zoning Board of Appeals, the Community Preservation Act Committee, Diversity Task

Group of Envision Arlington, and Disability Commission. The Remote Participation Study Committee should monitor these meetings to learn what works best for conducting productive hybrid meetings and what practices can be improved for these and future groups conducting hybrid meetings.

4. The Town should equip one or more of the following meeting spaces for remote participation in 2022 to accommodate the initial boards listed above. Depending on the room and scale of audiovisual setup, we estimate that rooms will cost between \$3,000 and \$125,000 to equip. The RPSC will include several suggested tiers of equipment build-out in the final report that will fall into the above budget range. The RPSC will need input from the listed committees and Town staff to finalize our recommendations. The meeting spaces under consideration are as follows:
 - a. Lyons Hearing Room
 - b. Town Hall Annex, First Floor Conference Room
 - c. Town Hall Annex, Second Floor Conference Room
 - d. Town Hall Annex, Town Manager’s Conference Room
 - e. Public Safety Building – O’Neill Community Room
 - f. Community Center – H&HS Conference Room
 - g. Other Community Center Rooms
5. The Town should update technology in the Select Board Chambers to allow remote participation usage without a dedicated operator from ACMi. The Town Manager should develop a plan to allow other boards, committees, and commissions to use the Select Board room when not in use by the Select Board.
6. The Town should commit to active outreach to raise awareness of scheduled meetings, increase the diversity and number of participants attending all meetings, including hybrid meetings, and provide other methods for public engagement in the business of town boards, committees, and commissions. The RPSC will offer additional recommendations on steps the Town might take in its 2022 and 2023 reports to Town Meeting.

Town Meeting Warrant Article

The Remote Participation Study Committee does not recommend submitting a Warrant Article to the 2022 spring Town Meeting. The Select Board and the School Committee have the authority to continue to permit remote participation for meetings held under Massachusetts’ Open Meeting Law. No formal bylaw changes are needed to implement the current recommendations of the Remote Participation Study Committee.

Actions the Select Board can Implement Immediately

1. The Select Board should request that the Town Manager's office continue to work with the Remote Participation Study Committee to determine which technology should be purchased in the coming year and whether the recommendations of this committee will require additional staff support.
2. The Select Board should ask the Town Manager to take steps to begin implementing hybrid meeting technology and appropriate operational support from staff to accommodate, at minimum, hybrid meetings in 2022 for the high priority boards, committees and commissions named in Recommendation #3.
3. The Select Board should request the Town Manager's office to assess which committees could share use of the Select Board's chambers for their regular meetings.

Information Collected to Consider Study Committee Charges and Inform Recommendations

In the fall of 2021, the Remote Participation Study Committee conducted two surveys to learn about the opinions of the members of the Town and School's boards, committees, and commissions and of the general public regarding hybrid meetings. The results of these surveys indicated significant support for hybrid meetings, helped clarify which meetings the public would want prioritized for hybrid meetings, and identified concerns shared by board, committee and commission members and the general public about how the meetings would be conducted from an organizational and technical perspective. The committee also heard a presentation from an author of a paper- "[Zoom Does Not Reduce Unequal Participation: Evidence from Public Meeting Minutes](#)," which highlighted the limitations of virtual or hybrid meeting attendance as a panacea for increasing the diversity of voices at public meetings. In addition, two members of the committee (Alex Bagnall and James Feeney) explored the technical requirements to support hybrid meetings and inventoried the rooms available both now and after April 1st, when the emergency order allowing remote meetings is currently scheduled to expire.

We created a report for each survey that summarized the results. Both are available on the Remote Participation Study Committee website and as an appendix to this document. As people are much more familiar with all-remote meetings than hybrid meetings for Town of Arlington public meetings, their answers and expectations may not be perfectly reflective of the reality of hybrid meetings. This unfamiliarity should be taken into account when reviewing the survey results.