

TOWN OF ARLINGTON MASSACHUSETTS

REPORT OF THE

Remote Participation Study Committee



TO THE

ANNUAL TOWN MEETING APRIL 2022

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Introduction

The *Remote Participation Study Committee* (RPSC) was created as a result of a positive vote on Article 40 during the 2021 Town Meeting to study the benefits and challenges of providing hybrid meeting options to Arlington's public bodies. In the six months since we first convened at the end of September 2021 we have met 14 times as a full committee, and additional times by subcommittee. We designed, collected, and analyzed two surveys, spoke to several committees in town, and communicated with our state representatives. On February 7th we presented an interim report to the Select Board recommending that the Town pilot hybrid meetings in 2022 with a representative subset of Arlington's boards, committees, and commissions. We expect the results of this pilot to inform our final recommendations to the 2023 Annual Town Meeting.

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

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. The Remote Study Committee was convened on September 29, 2021.

Among other charges, the RPSC was tasked with making short-term implementation recommendations to the Select Board. One of our key recommendations is to implement a hybrid participation pilot program to test the various technical, operational, and logistical protocols required for a successful hybrid meeting.

This report to Town Meeting summarizes our recommendations to the Select Board, their response, the proposed structure of a hybrid meeting pilot program, and the technology and rooms suggested for the hybrid meeting pilot.

In the coming year, the Remote Participation Study Committee will develop guidelines for best practices for remote participation, including suggesting rules and procedures for conducting hybrid meetings and recommendations for additional technology purchases and staff time. 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.

This first section of this report summarizes our February 7th recommendations to the Select Board. The Select Board received the report favorably, noting that they “welcomed the approach to pilot different implementations of hybrid meetings,” subject, of course, to budgetary and space constraints. The Board further asked the Town Manager to begin working to implement a pilot study consistent with the RPSC recommendations. We are pleased to note that the Select Board has recently approved the [Town Manager's updated 3-year ARPA \(American Rescue Plan Act\) spending framework](#) that includes funding to purchase equipment for hybrid meetings.

Interim Report to the Select Board

Summary

On February 7, 2022 the Remote Participation Study Committee (RPSC) provided an interim report and presentation to the Select Board (highlights below). The recommendations were partly informed by two surveys we did to gather the perspectives of both the general public and the members of Arlington's boards, commissions, and committees. What follows are the ranked recommendations and suggestions to the Select Board to support hybrid meetings in the near and longer term. The full report, including the survey responses, can be found on the Town of Arlington's Remote Participation Study Committee website, [linked here](#).

The Select Board received the report favorably, noted that they were open to the idea of trying hybrid meetings, subject to funding and meeting space constraints. The report was received and referred to the Town manager for a review of budget implications of a pilot program. Since the February 2022 meeting, the RPSC has continued to identify potential rooms and technologies necessary for a pilot program to test hybrid meetings.

Ranked Recommendations to the Select Board

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 response 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 3 to 4 locations and technology to enable hybrid meetings in 2022 for those committees willing to pilot hybrid meeting technology. 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, committees, and commissions involved in the pilot. 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 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 2023 report to Town Meeting.

Recommendation Against Submitting a 2022 Town Meeting Warrant Article

The Remote Participation Study Committee did 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's Open Meeting Law. No formal bylaw changes are needed to implement the current recommendations of the Remote Participation Study Committee. The RPSC may, however, decide to propose a Warrant Article for the 2023 Town Meeting.

Suggested 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.
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 Address 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 July 15th, 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 are [linked here](#). 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.

Hybrid Participation Pilot

Goals and Objectives

The goal of the proposed Hybrid Participation Pilot is to determine the following: i) whether to recommend that more, or all, of Arlington's boards, commissions, and committees adopt hybrid meetings at the end of the pilot, ii) what opportunities exist for maximizing the benefits and mitigating or adapting to disadvantages of different hybrid meeting technologies, iii) the protocols and procedures that should be in place to facilitate productive hybrid meetings for public bodies, iv) the recommended hybrid meeting technology solutions for public meetings of varying scale and format.

Suggested Structure of Pilot Program

- The pilot will run for 6-7 months, concluding at the end of February 2023.
- The Remote Participation Study Committee identified a number of boards, committees, and commissions that have agreed to participate in the pilot (see below).
- Participating boards, committees, and commissions will meet in designated meeting rooms outfitted with suitable equipment to provide for remote and in-person participation.
- We will seek the following input during the pilot:
 - Survey meeting members and public participants at the end of each meeting, collecting qualitative and quantitative data.
 - Meet with chairs of hybrid participation pilot participants twice during the pilot to gather qualitative feedback
 - Meet with others involved in the hybrid participation pilot, including Town and ACMi staff
- Before beginning the Hybrid Participation Pilot each board, commission, and committee will decide how to handle certain decision points, such as whether and how the public participates remotely and what to do in case of a technical failure.
- Before each meeting in which a member of the public is participating remotely, the chair will announce the procedures and expectations for in person and remote participation. At the start of each meeting, the Board/Committee chair will inform the meeting participants that they are participating in a hybrid participation pilot program and that they will be asked for their feedback at the end of the meeting.

Meetings, Boards, and Committees Agreed to, or Considering Participating in the Pilot

In choosing which boards, committees, and commissions to recommend for the pilot, we looked for those which were of highest interest to the Arlington Community, as indicated by the survey results, as well as those that were a variety of sizes and which have differing levels of public participation. The following have either agreed to participate in the pilot or are strongly considering participating. Those who have not yet taken their final vote are italicized.

Formal boards and committees that have traditionally been filmed by ACMi:

- Select Board, School Committee, Arlington Redevelopment Board

Committees that have not traditionally been filmed by ACMi:

- *Arlington Human Rights Coalition, Arlington Tourism and Economic Development, Clean Energy Future Committee, Community Preservation Act Committee, Disability Commission, Diversity Task Group of Envision Arlington, Tree Committee, Zoning Board of Appeals*

Documents to be Provided to Those Piloting Hybrid Meetings

- A detailed explanation of how to use the hybrid meeting technology in each of the rooms, including how to ensure that the meetings are fully accessible.
- A short description of the remote participation pilot that clearly spells out any difference in access or participation for in-person and remote participants to be posted along with the meeting announcement and agenda.
- A short online questionnaire to be filled out by meeting members and participants at the end of each hybrid meeting. Separate quantitative information will be collected from the Board Chair or designee regarding location of participants, meeting length and structure, etc.
- A list of “decision points” that each board, commission, and committee will need to make before beginning the pilot.
- Questions to ask each board, committee, and commission during the three and six month check-in.

Proposed Schedule

- Finalize which boards, commissions, and committees will participate in the initial pilot (April 2022)
- Finalize initial locations to be prepared with hybrid technology (April 2022)
- Order technology components (late April 2022)
- Install hybrid meeting technology in three to four rooms (June-August 2022)
- Consider additional requests for Hybrid Pilot participation (June 2022)
- Finalize and distribute documentation for those in the pilot (July 2022)
- Train committee chairs and staff (August 2022)
- Launch pilot (August/September 2022)
- Initial check in with each board, commission, and committee in the pilot (November 2022)
- Final check in with each board, commission, and committee in the pilot (February 2023)
- Data review (March 2023)
- Create a report for the Select Board and Town Meeting of findings and recommended next steps (March & April 2023)
- Deliver final report to Town Meeting 2023 (May 2023)

Technology and Room Recommendations

Summary

The rooms and corresponding technology needs of the Arlington boards, commissions, and committees were categorized into four tiers described as Types A to D. The types were categorized in terms of meeting size and in complexity of internal and external participation and presentation expectations.

While all room types A to D are summarized below, for the pilot program the intention is to equip two Type C and one Type D rooms. The experience with these three rooms and their technology will inform future equipment choices for Type B rooms, as one option is to use a more elaborate version of a Type C room technology. The costs are estimates and pricing for video conferencing equipment may fluctuate. Since the pilot does not currently include setting up a Type B room, groups such as the Arlington Redevelopment Board, Arlington Human Rights Committee, and Zoning Board of Appeals may consider using either the Type A or Type C rooms during the Pilot program. While not ideal for these groups even a limited number of meetings in these rooms may help inform the technology needs for the Type B rooms.

Type A, the Select Board Chambers, is a special case where the technology is not just used for remote participation, but also for broadcast via ACMI. Upgrading this room's technology will require input and buy-in from a wider group of stakeholders and will also likely have multiple possible sources of funding.

With regard to the budgeted costs, note that there is a wide variability in equipment costs depending on the size of room and timing of purchases. For the initial pilot, grant and ARPA funds will allow us to equip two Type C and one Type D rooms. Our experience with the two Type C rooms will inform future equipment choices for Type C and Type B rooms.

Categories of Rooms and Videoconferencing Technologies

Type A

Uses: Fixed size committees with remote participants, presentation needs

Recommended Room: Select Board Chambers

- Top tier
- Two large displays
- Multiple cameras
- Presentation video input
- Individual microphones for board/committee members

- One microphone for public participation; could be upgraded to a steerable array microphone in ceiling or wall for greater audience coverage
- Staffing required - could be mitigated with more up-front technology expenditures; recent experience in SB Chambers suggest that the current technology situation is somewhat precarious and requires a lot of on-site technical assistance.
- Computer for video conferencing control
- Requires input and coordination with ACMi for technology selections
- Estimate capital cost: \$75 to 125k

Type B

Uses: Medium sized committees with remote committee members and participants

Recommended Room: O'Neil Room in Community Safety Building

- Two flat panel displays
- One or two cameras
- Presentation video input
- Microphone array for board/committee
- One or two microphones for public participations
- Computer for videoconferencing control or integrated into soundbar
- Final technology choices informed by piloting of Type C rooms, if Neat Bar works out, a Neat Bar Pro designed for larger rooms is available.
- Example: ARB, ZBA
- Estimated capital cost: \$10 to 25k

Type C

Uses: Small committees with limited number of remote participants

Recommended Rooms: Town Hall Annex First Floor Conference Room
Health and Human Services Conference Room
Portable Cart for Community Center

Technology:

- One 65-inch (or smaller/larger) nominal display on wall - \$1,000
- Neat bar with remote touch panel - \$3,200
 - a. Neat Bar is an integrated loudspeaker, camera, and Zoom Room host device with a dedicated, no configuration touch panel remote control.
- Rolling cart for portable application
- Example: Envision/ Diversity Task Group, Community Preservation Act Committee

Type D

Uses: Small committees with few guests

Recommended Room: Town Hall Annex Second Floor Conference Room

Technology:

- No display (leave existing projector and screen)
- Meeting Owl Pro USB camera/microphone array on table - \$1,000
- Laptop for video-conferencing hosting and control – \$1,000 - \$2,000
- Example: Arlington Commission for Arts and Culture (ACAC)

Next Steps

The Remote Participation Study Committee will work to initiate the Hybrid Meeting Pilot, identify potential improvements and options to expand hybrid meetings further. These results and recommendations will be presented to the 2023 Town Meeting. The RPSC will monitor the status of statute changes at the state level, such as whether fully remote meetings are allowed to continue, and whether board members are in general allowed to participate remotely. Our recommendations may also be informed by any new meeting practices adopted by our peer communities.