

**TOWN OF ARLINGTON
MASSACHUSETTS**

**REPORT OF THE
Remote Participation Study Committee**



**TO THE
ANNUAL TOWN MEETING APRIL 2023**

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Summary

Consistent with its 2021 founding Warrant Article, the Remote Participation Study Committee (RPSC) surveyed the members and public attendees of the Town of Arlington's boards, commissions, and committees to assess opinions on the desire for, the logistical considerations, and the technical implementation of hybrid meetings consistent with the Massachusetts Open Meeting law and various acts of the Governor and Legislature that have temporarily provided for remote and hybrid public meetings due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was clear that both members and participants of the Town's public bodies were interested in preserving remote access to public meetings should these provisions be continued or made permanent.

The RPSC proposed and implemented a pilot program for hybrid meetings from late 2022 to early 2023. This pilot program was supported with RPSC generated documents outlining key decision points to help participating boards, commissions and committees develop the best practices for their hybrid meetings. Town staff identified and equipped several meeting rooms in the Town Hall, Community Center, and Public Safety building with a variety of videoconferencing systems to provide the technology and locations for hybrid meetings. Brief "How-to" documentation was provided in these rooms to allow meeting members to initiate and run hybrid meetings with little or no involvement of Town staff. During the pilot program, 11 public bodies considered participation and 8 boards, commission and committees tested hybrid meetings. The public bodies that engaged in hybrid meetings were generally those that primarily carried out their work between their members, with low public participation in the meetings, and could be described as meetings of deliberative or working groups. The Arlington Redevelopment Board (ARB) and the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) considered, and opted out of the hybrid pilot as their meetings are adjudicative in nature and require greater interaction with applicants with presentations from architects, engineers, attorneys and other consultants. Overall, the boards, commissions and committees participating in the pilot program were able to productively conduct hybrid meetings with the provided hardware and resources. The challenges identified were mostly centered around managing communications and participation between the people meeting in-person or attending remotely.

The Town now has several rooms equipped to support hybrid meetings and the RPSC generated materials are on the Town website to allow public bodies to make key decisions on the running of hybrid meetings. While the RPSC will dissolve at the end of the 2023 Annual Town Meeting, the capabilities and resources for hybrid meetings are in place for the future.

The RPSC would like to thank all respondents to our multiple surveys, the members of the boards, commissions and commissions who gave their time to evaluate and participate in the pilot program, and the Town staff who helped support the installation of equipment and setting up the rooms to allow the pilot program to take place.

Introduction

The Remote Participation Study Committee (RPSC) was created as a result of a positive vote on Article 40 during the 2021 Town Meeting establishing a committee to study the benefits and challenges of providing remote and hybrid meeting options for Arlington's public bodies. Since we first convened 29 September 2021, we have met 29 times as a full committee, and additional times by subcommittee. We designed, collected, and analyzed two surveys, spoke to numerous Town committees, and communicated with our legislative delegation. We presented an interim report to the Select Board (February 7th, 2022) and a report to the 2022 Annual Town Meeting recommending that the Town pilot hybrid meetings in 2022 and 2023 with a representative subset of Arlington's boards, committees, and commissions. This hybrid pilot program was initiated in December 2022 and continues through the date of publication of this report. In this report to the 2023 Annual Town Meeting we present the results of the hybrid pilot program and final recommendations for conducting hybrid meetings in the future. Per the 2021 warrant article establishing the Remote Participation Study Committee, the committee will dissolve at the end of the 2023 Town Meeting.

The RPSC was charged to consider the following items:

1. Evaluating the benefits and challenges of providing hybrid forms of public meetings
2. Assessing which public bodies can and should provide remote participation.
3. Examining what portions of meetings can and should be available for remote participation.
4. Determining what, if any, local rules beyond legal requirements can and should be established for remote participation.
5. Understanding the costs of different models of remote participation, especially hybrid remote participation
6. Evaluating the impact of remote participation on accessibility requirements and concerns
7. Assessing ways that public bodies provide information to the public about their work

The Remote Participation Study Committee members and their appointing authority are **Mustafa Varoglu** (Chair, Town Moderator), **Jennifer Susse** (Vice-Chair, Sept 2021 to January 2023, Town Moderator), **Alex Bagnall** (Vice Chair, Feb 2023 – April 2023, Town Moderator), **Stacie Smith** (Secretary, Town Moderator), **Guillermo Hamlin** (Town Moderator, January 2023 to April 2023), **Janice Cagan-Teuber** (Disability Commission), **James Feeney** (Town Manager), **Bill Hayner** (School Committee), **Eric Helmuth** (Select Board), and **Rachel Zsembery** (Redevelopment Board).

One of the charges of the RPSC was to make short-term implementation recommendations to the Select Board. A key recommendation was the proposal to implement a hybrid participation pilot program to test the various technical, operational, and logistical protocols required for successful hybrid meetings. Although the committee included all-remote meetings of public bodies (e.g., held only on Zoom with no in-person participants), the majority of our work focused on the more complex question of hybrid meetings, where members of the public body and/or members of the public have the option to participate either in-person or remotely. With the support of the Select Board and Town Manager, the RPSC has conducted this pilot.

This 2023 report to Town Meeting summarizes the technical, operational, and logistical guidelines, and recommendations developed for the hybrid meeting pilot program. These guidelines include best practices for remote participation, including suggesting rules and procedures for conducting hybrid meetings, and recommendations for outfitting specific rooms with a variety of video conferencing technology. The results of the pilot program are presented based on analysis of surveys and in-person feedback from the meeting members and public attendees who have piloted hybrid participation meetings. We also provide our recommendations to the Town for the conduct of future hybrid meetings.

Implementation of Hybrid Participation Pilot Program

Goals and Objectives Hybrid Pilot Program

The goals of the proposed Hybrid Participation Pilot were to determine the following:

Goal 1: Whether to recommend that more, or all, of Arlington's boards, commissions, and committees adopt hybrid meetings at the end of the pilot.

Outcome Hybrid meetings are available to be used where appropriate, and there are advantages to holding hybrid meetings. A blanket recommendation is inappropriate. The use of hybrid meetings should be determined by the individual public bodies and their needs and subject to state law permitting remote meetings.

Goal 2: What opportunities exist for maximizing the benefits and mitigating or adapting to disadvantages of different hybrid meeting technologies.

Outcome: As a result of the pilot program, NeatBar has been identified as the most appropriate technology for small and medium-sized rooms. Several rooms have been outfitted with NeatBars. Decision points and how-to guides to best use these technologies in a hybrid meeting setting have been generated and can be found with other resources for committee members on the [town website](#).

Goal 3: What protocols and procedures should be in place to facilitate productive hybrid meetings for public bodies?

Outcome: Refer to how to guide and decision-points document to address protocols and procedures that should be in place to facilitate productive hybrid meetings for public bodies. These can be found with other resources for committee members on the [town website](#).

Goal 4: Recommend hybrid meeting technology solutions for public meetings of varying scale and format.

Outcome: The town has outfitted several rooms with the appropriate NeatBar technology for those rooms/committee types based on testing that occurred during the pilot program. The Neat bar was preferred to the Meeting Owl equipment. The product's integration with Zoom meeting administration, high quality two-way audio, and smart camera technology allows remote and in-person participants to equitably participate and interact in many situations.

Participating Pilot Hybrid Program Boards, Commissions, and Committees

The eight participating committees, boards, and commissions that participated in the hybrid meeting pilot program are shown in Table 1 along with the technology they employed during the course of the pilot program.

In addition to these participating committees, the Arlington Redevelopment Board and the Zoning Board of Appeals considered the hybrid pilot program and ultimately decided not to participate. These boards will continue holding their meetings in person or remotely, respectively.

The boards, commissions, and committees that participated in the pilot program conducted meetings in three types of categories:

- A. Meetings primarily composed of members working together with public attendants mostly present as observers (this makes up the majority of the boards, commission and committees in Table 1)
- B. Meetings held with regular public attendance and participation resulting in adjudication of applications (ARB and ZBA)
- C. Task groups: meetings without formal membership composed of a chair and members of the public who participate.

In general, the meetings focusing on members working primarily with less public participation tended to enter or remain in the hybrid pilot program while those with greater public attendance and adjudication of applications decided not to proceed with the pilot program after deliberate consideration of how it would fit their needs.

Table 1: Participating Committees, Boards, and Commissions of the hybrid meeting pilot program

Committee, Board or Commission	Proposed Room	First Hybrid Meeting Date	Video Conferencing Technology
Arlington Human Rights Commission	HHS Conference Room	Dec. 21, 2022	NeatBarPro, 2 Flat Panels
Clean Energy Future Committee	Town Hall Annex 2nd Floor	Dec 16, 2022	NeatBarPro, 2 Flat Panels
Disability Commission	HHS Conference Room	Dec. 21, 2022	NeatBarPro, 2 Flat Panels
Diversity Task Group	Town Hall Annex 2nd Floor	Dec. 8, 2022	NeatBarPro, 2 Flat Panels
Finance Committee	APD Community Room	Jan 30, 2022	NeatBoard
LGBTQIA Rainbow Commission	HHS Conference Room	Nov. 17, 2022	NeatBarPro, 2 Flat Panels
Long Range Planning Committee	Town Manager's Conference room	Feb 17, 2023	2 Owls, upgraded to NeatBar with large single monitor
Tree Committee	Town Hall Annex 2nd Floor	Nov. 9, 2022	NeatBarPro, 2 Flat Panels

Development of the supporting documentation for hybrid meetings

To provide the hybrid pilot program participants with a common starting point, the Remote Participation Study Committee generated a set of documents to prepare members for successful hybrid meetings. These included a “How To” summary sheet summarizing the key resources available for booking and running hybrid meetings, a “Decision Points Documents” to prepare members for successful hybrid meetings and, a series of technical guides for using the videoconferencing technology.

The materials generated can be found with other resources for committee members on the [town website](#).

1. “How-To” Summary Sheet

A one-page summary sheet summarized the resources available for booking and running a hybrid pilot meeting. This document generally reflects the information available on the Remote Participation Study Committee website but was put in PDF format to allow for offline sharing between board, committee and commission members for greater convenience.

2. Decision Points Document

We recognize that Arlington’s boards and committees operate in a variety of ways and have a range of needs associated with their work. A “one-size-fits-all” solution would not work here. Instead, we produced a guide for committees with various aspects of hybrid meetings for them to consider. The guide includes best practices, decision points, meeting preparation recommendations, an opening statement template, and links to additional resources. This allows committees to consider the finer points of meeting operations without having to reinvent the wheel and provides some level of consistency across meetings. Examples of the key considerations and decisions include deciding on how to manage questions and input from remote and in-person participants, the potential need to designate an additional member besides the chair to manage remote participants who may want to join or speak, and forming a contingency plan on what to do if there is technical failures during the meeting.

The participating pilot program chairs and members were provided a copy of this document to review and come to decisions on how best to run hybrid meetings for their boards, commissions or committees.

3. Technical guides: Room and their equipment

Deputy Town Manager Jim Feeney led the creation of use guides for the NeatBoard and the NeatBarPro. These are available both online on the RPSC website and in the video conference equipment outfitted rooms, with links to more in-depth manuals provided via QR code.

Why some Boards, Commissions or Committees decided not to participate

Two Boards, the Arlington Redevelopment Board (ARB) and the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA), that originally indicated interest in participating in the hybrid pilot program and after careful review of the advantages and challenges of hybrid meetings specific to their circumstances decided it was better to maintain either all in-person (ARB) or fully remote (ZBA) meetings.

Both of these boards frequently have applicants coming to them for decisions on zoning and special permitting matters, sometimes with support from architects, attorneys,

engineers, and other consultants, who may share materials for viewing by the boards and public. Both of these boards also tend to have well-attended meetings and require larger spaces.

The ARB holds its in-person meetings in the 2nd floor space of the renovated Community Center. These meetings presented two types of challenges. The technical challenge is that air handler noise in the room significantly diminishes the audio quality of the meeting for remote participants. The operational challenge is that there are not sufficient staff resources available to both participate in the meeting and run the remote elements of a large hybrid meeting. For these two reasons, the ARB decided not to hold hybrid meetings during the pilot period.

The ZBA performed a dry-run test case of a meeting (without public applicants) and felt that the technology would be sufficient to hold a hybrid meeting for the majority of their needs. Ultimately though, they did not see an advantage to hybrid meetings while fully remote meetings were still permitted. They did identify that to make a meeting with paper documents successful, they would need a document camera available to capture those materials for Zoom.

Survey results summary

In order to understand how the members and the participants in hybrid meetings in the pilot experienced this meeting format, the RPSC designed two surveys - one for Committee, Commissions, and Boards chairs, and the other for remote or in person attendees (including Commission, Committee and Board Members). The surveys asked questions about the logistics and numbers of participants remote and in person, the technologies and spaces used, the ease of use, technology problems, as well as benefits, challenges, and suggestions regarding their experiences with hybrid meetings. The public body chair and attendees' survey results are available on the [town website](#).

Ten Commission/Committee/Board chairs filled out the survey, along with 51 members or attendees. Most responses involved meetings where the Commission/Committee/Board members were divided between in-person and remote (that is, several members in each category), few to zero members of the public attended in person, and a handful attended remotely. All but one of the meetings described by chairs had a designated person helping to manage the interactions between the remote and in person participants, and all but one rated their experience as very easy or mostly easy to connect everyone remotely and in person. Participants, on the other hand, had a wide range of rankings for ease of connection, even for the same meetings, though many chalked it up to growing pains in learning the technology and new approaches for hybrid meetings.

Overall, most chairs and attendees reported few challenges with the hybrid meeting setup. However, some attendees and chairs did experience technical difficulties with the technology and had to rely on the expertise of technical support personnel. Some attendees found it challenging to stay on top of new people in the Zoom waiting room and struggled to identify speakers who were in person. Sound quality was also a concern for some, particularly for those in the meeting room. Additionally, some remote attendees reported feeling less a part of the meeting than when they were there in person or all remote. The Neat Bar technology was generally seen as effective, but some questioned its usefulness if few people attended in person. Finally, attendees noted that the logistics of public participation and the display of documents could be a concern.

Overall, many participants are satisfied with the current setup and hope to continue with hybrid meetings. In terms of suggestions for improvement, survey results highlighted the following ideas:

- Improve plans for uploading content during the meeting
- Better manage chat contents for in-person attendees
- Have a backup cellular hotspot connection in case of Wi-Fi failure.
- Have a way to identify in-person attendees on screen for remote participants.
- Improve sound systems for better audio for remote participants.
- Encourage in-person attendees to identify themselves when speaking.
- Fix cameras to avoid unnecessary zooming.
- Use a meeting/link management system to manage Zoom links.

Benefits

Chairs, members, and participants named a range of benefits of hybrid meetings. Some committees benefited from having certain members participate remotely, while others did not find any advantages over fully online meetings. Overall, hybrid meetings were seen as a flexible and convenient option for accommodating different needs and circumstances.

Frequently cited benefits of hybrid meetings included:

- Reduced need for participants to travel or prepare as much for the meeting.
- Greater openness, participation, and attendance, as people can choose to attend in person or remotely.
- More flexibility for participants with physical limitations or who have other commitments, such as work or childcare, and may not be able to attend in person.
- Seamless integration between in-person and remote attendees, allowing for equal participation and engagement.
- Safer and healthier meetings, as participants don't have to worry about potential health concerns, such as COVID or the flu.

- More open and inclusive participation, as virtual technology extends the public audience and creates a space for those who would prefer to participate in person.
- Many committee members appreciated the opportunity to participate remotely; a few appreciated the ability to be in person, but others did not find hybrid to offer any advantages over fully online meetings.

In addition to committee meetings, Town staff regularly use the installed hybrid technologies to support daily activities, including conducting panel interviews and engaging with outside consultants. Programmatic reach was also expanded at the Council on Aging through offering hybrid exercise classes and Shakespeare discussions, for example.

Challenges

While the hybrid participation pilot yielded many successes, it also identified several challenges that public bodies should be aware of before adopting a hybrid meeting format.

1. Logistics

There is a significant additional burden on the chair of the meeting, or the Town staff member tasked with running the meeting that should be carefully considered. Town Staff members or the meeting chair reported that at times they were unable to fully participate and share their expertise while managing the technical aspects of the hybrid meeting (monitoring the waiting room, admitting remote attendees, monitoring attendees for raised hands, monitoring chat, sharing documents to the remote participants and in person, etc.). In some cases it was determined that this would require another additional Town staff person, which may or may not be feasible. Respondents also noted an additional time commitment required of the meeting chair and/or the staff liaison to set up the technology and the meeting room before each hybrid meeting.

2. Staffing

As stated in the logistics challenge above, a hybrid meeting with meaningful remote participation by members and the public often increased the number of Town staff required to support a meeting. This additional staffing requirement can run into availability and budget constraints. Additionally, it should be recognized that Town staff are typically invited to participate in the meetings to share their perspective, historical background, and research and data related to their field of expertise. Asking them to provide technology and administrative support for the running of hybrid meetings may not be the best alignment with their role and expertise, and it is very difficult for one person to simultaneously

manage the remote aspects of a hybrid meeting and participate substantively in the discussion.

3. Technology Support

There is currently not a system in place to handle technology support issues that may arise during hybrid meetings that occur during non-business hours. Meeting chairs will be trained in basic meeting administration and software and hardware troubleshooting basics, but will be unable to address significant hardware or software issues that may arise during the meeting. This was identified as a serious challenge multiple times by the survey participants.

4. Infrastructure

There are a limited number of meeting rooms equipped to support hybrid meetings. The number of meeting rooms that are equipped to handle large public meetings is even more limited, and some of these spaces, including the large meeting room in the Community Center, have noise concerns around lingering HVAC issues. Even in the hybrid-equipped meeting rooms without known and documented noise problems, many survey respondents reported audio issues between the in-person and remote participants to be an issue. Additionally, the Town will need to find a solution (such as a document camera) to share physical documents which are brought in person to a hybrid meeting or hearing.

5. Accessibility issues

Some participants noted that they couldn't clearly hear other attendees when commenting. Since organizers do not know who will be attending their meetings, auto-captions should be enabled at all times. The host must enable the auto-captioning and then attendees can turn on closed captioning by clicking the button that appears at the bottom of the ZOOM screen for "Show Captions".

Some Deaf Arlington residents may prefer American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation over closed captioning for community events. In such cases, the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (MCDHH) hosts the statewide Interpreter referral service. ASL interpreters should be requested at least two weeks prior to any community-wide event. ASL Interpreters can be requested by mass.gov/mcdhh and finding the "request an interpreter" page, there is a cost associated with this service.

Proposed next steps

1. The term of the Remote Participation Study Committee will expire at the end of the 2023 Town Meeting and at that point the Town of Arlington will administer and manage the resources needed to continue to provide hybrid meeting logistics for those boards, commission and committees interested in continuing with hybrid meetings.
2. Booking fully remote and hybrid meetings will continue through the Town Manager's office as permitted by state law. The Town will continue to support the existing rooms with video conferencing technology (Zoom) and will equip additional spaces as needed.
3. The Town will continue expand the availability of hybrid technology by:
 1. Equipping more rooms for hybrid meetings.
 - i. The Town is well positioned to continue the process of equipping more conference rooms for remote participation as funds become available. The Town Manager's conference room on the second floor of the Town Hall Annex has recently been equipped with a NeatBar and a flat panel display.
 - ii. The Town will be determining how to best equip larger meeting rooms, such as the O'Neil Room in the Community Safety building, to support hybrid meetings.
 2. Making available the materials to committees that want hybrid capabilities by maintaining documents described above.
4. Explore opportunities to increase meeting options for boards, commissions, and committees to use Zoom webinars for large meetings.
5. The Remote Participation Study Committee did not feel the need to submit a Warrant Article to the 2023 Town Meeting as no changes to the Town Bylaws are necessary. As of April 1, 2023, the emergency legislation to extend key pandemic-era accommodations, including remote local government meeting authorization, has been extended through 31 March 2025, following the same guidelines that have been in place since the COVID-19 public health emergency was first declared in March 2020. Based on this extension the Town can continue to host remote and hybrid meetings without changes to Arlington's bylaws. With the varied nature, requirements, and support of meetings, the committee did not feel it appropriate to require boards and committees to hold hybrid meetings.

6. Hybrid Town Meeting

1. The question of a hybrid Town Meeting is not within the scope of this committee's work. That said, we have had discussions about the possibility of a hybrid Town Meeting and think some parts of our work would be applicable, however significant challenges remain to delivering a positive experience for remote and in-person attendees. It is clear from various discussions that Town Meeting would be quite interested in the possibility of a hybrid meeting.
2. Decision Points: Our decision points document raises a number of questions that would be worth considering in advance of a hybrid Town Meeting. Being transparent about policies in regard to a variety of possible scenarios (technology failures, etc) would be important with such a large and diversely situated body as Town Meeting.
3. Technology Support: While Town Meeting already has a significant level of technology support in the room, it would likely need to be greatly increased by going to a hybrid format. Running a twelve-person hybrid meeting is a challenge for a single chair. Running a 250 plus person meeting will require a team of people. Remote participants will also require support similar to what we have seen with remote Town Meeting.
4. Infrastructure: We think it unlikely that the technology we have explored for meetings involving six to twenty people in conference rooms would be useful for a meeting involving more than 250 people in the Town Hall. The requirements of Town Meeting are quite different from all our other meetings. As we have done with boards and committees, it would be important to consider all the requirements of Town Meeting and how those requirements would be accommodated in a hybrid format in terms of technology and staffing.
5. The legal landscape for having a hybrid Town Meeting, as for all municipal public meetings, is still evolving. While the legislature in March of 2023 explicitly added hybrid representative town meetings to the existing hybrid and remote provisions for other public bodies, all these provisions are temporary and will currently expire in March of 2025, Various bills currently under consideration in the legislature would make these provisions permanent, although there are several uncertainties about their final form including merely allowing versus requiring hybrid meetings, and the question of state funding for infrastructure and operating costs.

Conclusion

It is abundantly clear that, in general, both members of Arlington's boards, commissions, and committee and the members of the public who attend and participate in their meetings strongly desire the indefinite continuation of all-remote and hybrid public meetings. It is also clear from the Committee's work that, while successful hybrid meetings are entirely possible, they are the most challenging remote option and as such require careful consideration of training, technology, staffing, and meeting procedures to ensure equitable participation by those attending remotely. The Committee anticipates that state law will eventually provide for permanent operation of remote and hybrid public meetings and hopes that its work over the past two years will assist the Town in expanding and improving these vital new tools for civic participation in the months and years ahead.