

Our View

Remote meetings should be permanent

There should be a general consensus that the more people who participate in government, the better. So it's logical to think an effort to make rules to permanently require remote access to public meetings is worth embracing.

That's not the case — at least not everywhere. It's not that they shouldn't be allowed, nor that they aren't useful, the Massachusetts Municipal Association argues. Rather, it's that some cities and towns will want to opt out because remote meetings aren't useful to them.

"There are a number of municipalities already successfully utilizing remote participation," Adam Chapdelaine, the association's executive director, said in a story by Statehouse reporter Christian M. Wade. "We strongly support changes for towns to have a permanent option to conduct remote town meetings, and that this authority also be extended to open town meeting communities."

But, Chapdelaine said on behalf of the association's members, communities need the flexibility to choose not to do so for reasons such as a lack of public interest, access to technology, staff, space, and other factors.

So who gets to decide? Isn't it possible attendance goes down when there are no hybrid options? Is there really a community in Massachusetts that doesn't have access to a computer for live-streamed meetings? And anyway, how much space is necessary for that computer?

So many questions.

Widespread remote and hybrid public meetings began in earnest during the COVID-19 pandemic. That expired with the end of the Massachusetts public health emergency, but the emergency rules allowing remote meetings was extended. Now the rules are set to expire next year unless further action is taken.

Several bills aiming to mandate remote meetings moving forward are part of the Municipal Empowerment Act filed by Gov. Maura Healey in January. The act also proposes continuing other policies that originated during the pandemic — outdoor dining and to-go cocktails for restaurants, for instance.

"The countdown is on," members of a coalition including the American Civil Liberties Union, Common Cause Massachusetts, and the New England Newspaper & Press Association wrote in a joint statement in favor of mandating remote meetings.

"If lawmakers don't act this session, people with disabilities or other reasons they can't attend meetings will be completely shut out when city councils, select boards or school committees decide to hold meetings exclusively in person."

In opposition to the opt-out contingency, the coalition is pushing back against Healey's proposal. They say allowing public officials to choose in-person meetings only "would surely limit the public's ability to participate."

But Chapdelaine, from the Municipal Association, pointed out what the group deems to be obstacles.

"Each city and town has dozens of boards, councils and commissions which hold numerous meetings a year and often simultaneously," Chapdelaine said. "These municipalities continue to find the meeting mechanisms that work best for their residents."

We're with the coalition on this one. No elected official or group of elected officials should be allowed to thwart efforts to make government more accessible to all. Residents who don't want to participate can choose to stay home with the computer off. Residents who want to participate but can't get to the meeting deserve a choice, too.