Successful Community Engagement in an Era of Virtual Public Meetings

A Guide by and for Commissioners

Urban Habitat
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Public meetings are crucial to ensuring government transparency and accountability. When done right, these meetings let community members learn about decisions being considered, weigh in on policy and program proposals, and encourage debate centering the perspectives of those who are most impacted. They allow residents an opportunity to shape laws and institutions guided by their expertise and lived experiences. This is not only essential to the health of our democracy, but they are required by open meeting laws.

With public meetings moving to online platforms since the outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020, leaders and government staff, including those serving on public boards and commissions, have had to adapt quickly. As a result, we have seen a rise in practices that are compounding existing inequities. With more people attending virtual public meetings, those facilitating the meetings are increasingly limiting community participation by requiring public comments to be submitted in writing, setting limits on the number of people who can participate in the meeting, and capping how many people can provide public comments. This is creating a competitive dynamic in which the people who can register first are heard the loudest.

Although virtual public meetings have made participation easier for some, it has created new barriers for others, including non-English monolingual speakers, unhoused individuals, people with disabilities, low-income people who lack access to broadband and electronic devices, and people for whom this technology is new.

To encourage robust participation of these and other historically marginalized communities at public meetings, Urban Habitat developed the recommendations that are described in this report. This resource was created with input from commissioners who are serving on boards and commissions across the country. These leaders are part of the [Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute](#), a program that trains and supports low-income people of color to serve on boards and commissions.
Setting up for Success

Transitioning from in-person public meetings to an online platform requires training and preparation. By implementing the following recommendations, members of the public will be able to participate in the meeting more effectively, and staff will be able to ensure the meeting runs smoothly.

Checklist for commission staff

Before the meeting

01 Train commissioners and city/county staff

- Train commissioners and commission staff on how to use the online meeting platform. This training should include basics such as changing one’s name, how to mute and unmute, calling on members of the community, sharing screens, etc.

- Train commission staff to identify and troubleshoot technology issues that may arise during the meeting. Make sure each meeting has at least one point person who can address technology issues as they arise. Make it a practice to log on early to do a sound check and troubleshoot tech issues.

- Share instructions on how to use the meeting platform on your social media accounts, website, etc. Videos and FAQs are often available on the meeting platform’s websites.

- Provide a brief technology overview at the beginning of the meeting and/or at the beginning of the public comment period to ensure that community members can participate to their fullest in the meeting.
02 Information dissemination

- Post relevant information people will need to join the meeting, such as login and passwords, date and time of the meeting, agendas and accompanying resources (memos, reports).

- Ensure written materials are translated, and interpretation and closed captioning services are available. Publicize that interpretation is available.

- Publish parameters for public comment, including who can speak, time limits, and when the public comments will be heard. Reiterate this information at the start of each meeting.

- Establish a clear process for submitting documents that will be reviewed at the meeting. These documents should be made available to the public according to public transparency laws and translated into other languages according to local equal access ordinances.

- Ensure documents can be found and easily downloaded from the commission website, including a meeting agenda, roster of commissioners, and ways to contact the commission staff directly.
During the meeting

03 Host a smooth and effective meeting

- Enable the waiting room feature.
- Limit the ability of participants to unmute themselves to keep background noise to a minimum.
- Disable comments and allow people to chat with the hosts only.
- Stop screen-sharing during the public comment period so that speakers can be seen.
- Ask people to state their name and affiliation before speaking, especially during public comments.
- Start the meeting with a two-minute overview of the features of the online platform being used. Everyone should know the basics, such as how to mute and unmute, turn the video on and off, raise hands, and ask a question through chat, if permitted.
- Offer multiple options for submitting public comments, including in written form before or during the meeting.
- Anticipate the number of individuals who will be in line for public comment, calculate the time these will take, plan and announce the additional time that will be available for public comment. This helps the public decide if they wish to speak or send their comments in written form.
Checklist for Advocates
Before the meeting

01 Encourage member participation

- Train leaders and allies before the meeting. Make it clear why the issue is important, why they should participate in the meeting, and how their participation may influence the outcome.

- Train leaders and others on how to use the technology. Review the agenda and practice giving public comments using the platform. Ensure everyone has information on different ways to participate (video, calling-in, etc.).

- Send invitations to the public meeting, along with relevant links and information.

- Explore alternative ways to share information about the meeting, track who signed up and participated, i.e. Facebook Events or Eventbrite.

- Identify allies whose issues intersect with yours. The public meeting may be an opportunity to connect your issues with those of your allies to demonstrate shared priorities.

- Virtual meetings offer the opportunity to engage more and diverse voices. Identify who or what communities are missing from these meetings, and consider if this is the right time to engage them.

- People who have a seat at the table should intentionally invite other people.
During the meeting

02 Have your voice heard at virtual public meetings

Remember to state your name and affiliation each you speak. This lets others in the meeting know who else is present and speaking to their issue.

Use the chat option to share information about your organization, upcoming meetings, and events. Share a link for people to sign up for updates or follow you on your social media page.
Conclusion

Our hope is that commissioners, commission staff, and other government decision-makers will adopt the recommendations listed above, as appropriate. The recommendations come from the real-life experiences of commissioners from different parts of the country, serving on local, regional, and state commissions. The recommendations are intended to increase community participation, improve government transparency, and ensure everyone, particularly members of the community, are able to participate equally.
Urban Habitat created the Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute (BCLI) in 2009 to increase the political participation and decision-making power of low-income communities and communities of color. The BCLI trains leaders committed to advancing social justice, helps them get onto local and regional boards and commissions, and provides individualized support throughout their commission service.

We help replicate the BCLI program across the country with partners who are working to catalyze systemic change. Our replication partners and their alumni were instrumental in developing the recommendations outlined in this document.

Our replication partners include:
Nexus Community Partners in Minneapolis
Step Up Maryland
Texas Organizing Project
Valley Onward (formerly Building Healthy Communities) in Merced

Our ally partners include:
Liberty Hill Foundation in Los Angeles
Mid-City CAN in San Diego

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