

Dear Senate Government Operations Committee Members,

I am the Selectboard Chairperson for the Town of Jay, Vermont and am writing to you regarding the amendment being considered to the Open Meeting Law requiring all meeting to be hybrid meetings.

Our selectboard opposes the amendment requiring all meetings to be hybrid. Instead we are advocating for the type of meeting: Fully Remote, Hybrid or In-Person, to be at the discretion of the public body for the following reasons:

1. Hybrid meetings are more difficult to conduct and present many more technological challenges than either Fully Remote or In-person meetings. Representing a small town in Northern Vermont that has a very small number of registered voters, I have noted that there is a very small pool of candidates willing or able to run for public office. That being said, all of us are essentially "committed but untrained volunteers" who are paid a minor stipend of \$1200-\$1800 a year depending on the number of meetings we are required to attend. over the years I have found that the ever-increasing reliance on technology has often discouraged people from serving in elected positions in our small town. The issues that arise with the reliance on technology is something we are already struggling with since all of our elected officials do not have the technological skills, knowledge or training to utilize such technology, let alone provide a Hybrid type meeting. Nor do we have the financial ability to hire personnel to conduct such tasks.
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2. Often, it is the Town Clerk who becomes the "appointed" technology point person regardless of their technological skill or knowledge. By nature, Hybrid meetings require, someone to oversee and dedicate their focus to the technology, thereby prohibiting them from being an active participant at the meetings which oftentimes is required or advantageous to conduct town Business. We have been unsuccessful in the past three years to find someone to oversee our website and hiring someone to also oversee the technology needs during meetings will be virtually impossible, not to mention cost prohibitive for our small community.
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3. In our rural area of the Northeast Kingdom, internet access is still an issue and unavailable to many of our residents. As of yet, the State has been unable to provide rural communities with reliable, high-speed access to the internet which makes the point of Hybrid meeting moot for many of our citizens. Conducting

our Town Meeting through a Hybrid model would be a logistical nightmare for both the elected officials and the participants. Besides the fact that we do not have the technology to conduct such meeting formats in a large gathering, we again do not have the trained personnel to provide the technological service.

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4. A "one size fits all" mandate such as the proposed amendment to the open meeting law does not take into account the individual needs or financial stability of different smaller communities in Vermont, especially those in rural parts of the state or those with a limited tax base who are already struggling to keep up with the ever-increasing taxes on their properties. The equipment to implement hybrid meetings is expensive and, as stated earlier, requires trained personnel to operate and oversee its availability which would also come at an additional cost to many of the small towns in Vermont. Conservative estimates are about \$5,000 to set up a single room with equipment as well as the additional ongoing annual costs of access and personnel would add considerably to the tax burden of our residents.

We appreciate your willingness to serve on this committee and your commitment to improving the communications and accountability through modifications of the open meeting law, as well as your willingness to arrive at a compromise solution. The Jay Selectboard hopes you will consider allowing the individual town governments to select the type of meeting, Fully Remote, Hybrid or In-Person, which will best serve the needs of their individual communities with regards to the Open Meeting Law.

Thank you for taking the time to read my comments and considering our request to have all meetings styles be at the discretion of the Town Officials who know and understand the needs of their individual communities and understand their communities' economic constraints.

Dave Sanders
Town of Jay Selectboard Chair