

I am the current President of the Northeastern Vermont Development Association (NVDA) and I am writing to you to provide my thoughts on requirements for hybrid public meetings.

NVDA serves the 55 municipalities in the northeastern corner of Vermont as both the Regional Planning Commission and the Regional Economic Development Corporation. The Northeast Kingdom covers 2,054 square miles and, as of the 2020 census, had 63,596 inhabitants. The Kingdom is home to largely rural areas and small communities many of which are remote from access to internet connections.

We face two major barriers with hybrid meetings - areawide access to broadband connections and lack of IT skills to operate hybrid meeting equipment. The lack of broadband access leads to hybrid meetings that include attendees with fiber access, attendees with higher speed DSL connections, attendees with low-speed DSL connections, and attendees with no internet access. Attendees will participate from their PC with both video and audio, from a PC with audio only to compensate for the low-speed access, or by telephone. It is critical that any legislation supports all possible methods of attending a hybrid meeting.

Availability of IT skills is a more difficult issue to address. Since the more remote towns have not had good internet access in the past, their interaction with technology has been limited. It will be difficult to create the skills to support a hybrid meeting competence in some towns, so alternatives must be available to achieve compliance with the requirements established by the Legislature. Unfortunately, this is a situation where providing funding produces limited success. Additional concerns are the cost and maintenance of equipment and physical space to host the hybrid meetings.

Remote meeting technology was instrumental in keeping business operating during COVID and has introduced a permanent requirement for the technology. The NVDA Board of Directors consists of two representatives for each town, all of the Legislators from the three counties, and several At-Large Directors; without robust hybrid meeting capabilities attendance at our Board and Committee meetings would be compromised.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to provide input to your development of hybrid meeting requirements.

Fred Saar