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Senator Ruth Hardy, Chair
Committee on Government Operations
Vermont State House
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633-5301

via email

February 14, 2024

Re: S.55

Dear Senator Hardy, Chair of Government Operations and Committee Members,

I am writing on behalf of the Colchester Selectboard regarding S.55 that is being discussed in your committee, related to electronic meetings. While the bill started out being permissive and allowing options, it has evolved into mandating hybrid meetings. We do not support mandated hybrid meetings.

Colchester values public participation in our local boards and commissions where we have about 85 elected and appointed officials providing policy input and decision-making. But we have not found an effective way to manage hybrid meetings, especially for our legislative body, the Selectboard.

We are able to run informative, effective and receptive meetings. We keep our meetings on point and inclusive by managing an agenda that allows for each item to be presented and discussed by the Selectboard and followed by comments from the public. Our Citizens to be Heard section, at the beginning of every regular meeting, permits each resident a turn at the microphone, with no time constraints and rarely is the chair compelled to exercise authority to restrain repetitive or inflammatory commentators.

We provide opportunities for people who choose not to or cannot attend the meetings in-person, to have their input considered through a process advertised on our agendas, at our meetings and on social media. Those who cannot participate in-person are encouraged to submit their comments which are included in the next Selectboard packet and published under Informational Items for the Selectboard, municipal staff and other residents to see and consider.

We would have to purchase more technology which has capital and ongoing operating costs to conduct mandated hybrid meetings. Grants are little help as we would have to pay additional staff on an ongoing basis to facilitate the concurrent electronic portions of the meetings on behalf of the Selectboard as it isn't really practical to effectively run meetings of a legislative body both in-person and online, at the same time.

It is imperative for the fluid exchange of ideas that we conduct our televised meetings in-person. A mandated hybrid meeting, in addition to the expense and complexity of managing the technology, would impinge on the efficacy of our meetings. In-person participation without the distraction of coordinating remote parties provides a much better forum for a productive meeting.

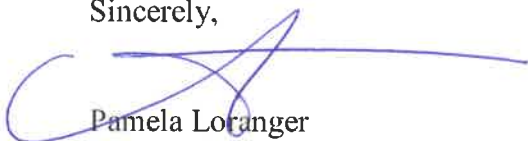
People who work with other people know that if topics are vast and challenging, it is best not to communicate through text or email, but instead, pick up the phone; if that is still difficult, the recommended alternative is to meet in-person. Local government is still local, and in our view, more connections can be made, and understandings reached with in-person meetings of legislative bodies rather than online or hybrid. That said, different meetings for different purposes in different locals at different times may warrant in-person, online, or hybrid, but it should be a local choice.

Local government is more of a direct democracy than state government. Local government allows voters to decide on budgets and capital projects and other significant items via voter ballot items. Local government has a representative element whereby voters elect Selectboard or Council members to decide on issues of lower thresholds than what goes before the voters---in meetings before the public--with public hearings and opportunities for public comment in general, and on substantive issues before the board. But they are meetings of the Selectboard and differ from Town Meeting where it is a meeting of the entire community.

State government is almost entirely representative and not direct democracy. Budgets, capital projects and policy are decided by elected officials, not the voters. The Vermont Legislature is generous in providing access for citizens and interested parties to testify in committees of limited topics and scope, sometimes via Zoom. But citizens aren't provided the opportunity to participate with the full House or Senate at all, let alone in a hybrid setting.

Hybrid meetings are seemingly being forced on the local governments, by the state government whose two legislative bodies do not have hybrid meetings for the public to participate in.

Sincerely,



Pamela Loranger
Chair and on behalf of the Colchester Selectboard.