

Good Afternoon. I want to thank the members of the Committee on Government Operations for allowing me to testify on Senate Bill No. 55. My name is Gary Briggs and I'm a Select Board member in the Town of Lunenburg.

I'm speaking out against this bill as it will place an undue hardship on the Town of Lunenburg, and countless rural Towns across the state. The plain and simple truth is that far too many communities lack the infrastructure or equipment to make hybrid meetings a viable option. According to a June 2021 Harvard Business Review article on "What It Takes to Run a Great Hybrid Meeting", the following key components are required:

-Equipment: As stated in the article "the world of "squawk boxes" on the conference room table, with those on the phone straining to hear, being "talked over" or guessing what's on that Powerpoint slide on a screen only their colleagues in the room can see is no longer sufficient." The authors' state "hybrid meetings are vastly more complex than meeting in-person or virtually. They are easy to do poorly and hard to do well".

Only an investment in enough high quality microphones in our Community Meeting Room can successfully meet the audio visual needs of a hybrid meeting. Estimated cost of Lunenburg is \$297.

The only way to successfully allow remote viewers to see and hear all that's going on in the room is through the use of Webcams. For Lunenburg, a minimum of 2 webcams and 2 laptop computers would be required to assure that remote attendees can see who is speaking and also view any flip chart or wall chart presentations. At a minimum we'd need to budget \$1,210 for this equipment.

A successful hybrid meeting requires a collaborative white board to help with the sharing of documents that are handed out to in-room participants. At almost every Lunenburg Select Board meeting, we hand out documents. Cost of collaborative white board software is around \$150/year.

Remote participants are at a significant disadvantage than in room participants. As a result, it is highly recommended that there be an "in-room avatar"...a staff person who gives remote participants a single point of contact (via text, chat or phone) so if there is a remote problem (for instance an in room speaker cannot be heard), the remote participant can quickly contact the "in-room avatar" and ask them to address this, or any other, issue. Lunenburg does not have the people power to do this.

-Internet Access: In Lunenburg we still struggle with good quality high speed internet.. Currently this type internet service is not available. Workshopper.com recommends purchasing a WiFi booster to help with spotty internet service. A good booster costs about \$120.

-Training: Certainly, in our Town, we do not have Select Board members or staff trained in how to operate any of the above equipment. Hybrid meetings also require ground rules and principal of conduct. Is the State prepared to provide workshops on how to run effective hybrid meetings and a Help Desk for municipalities to contact for assistance?

And, I haven't even begun to talk about the actual facility where hybrid meetings are held. In Lunenburg we hold our meetings in a room that is not at all ideal for hybrid meetings. It has 2 columns in the middle of the room which will interfere with any type of webcam. You may have heard of equipment such as the Owl (which costs a minimum of \$1,000). Many feel these are necessary to run a hybrid meeting but it's quickly pointed out any type of structural interference in the room renders this type equipment unusable.

And what about when one of our meetings is held in a different location? In Lunenburg, we hold our Town Meeting in our Elementary School Gymnasium, a much larger room than our Town Office Community Room. The equipment necessary to run a hybrid meeting in the Gymnasium will be vastly different than the Community Room, forcing us to purchase additional equipment, at an estimated cost of an additional \$1,804.

The question the Committee needs to ask itself is "are we mandating hybrid meetings or are we mandating successful hybrid meetings?" Goals for addressing both of those questions are vastly different. The bill provides for \$250,000 in grant funds to support this mandate. There are 256 cities and towns in the State of Vermont, which translates to funding for each community to be \$976.56. We project the cost to meet the requirements of hybrid meetings for our small Town to be in the vicinity of \$3,580. And that's just to provide the basic equipment for hybrid meetings, without any cost allocation for training, facility improvements and equipment repair and maintenance. It's hard to image that a successful hybrid meeting program could be developed for less than \$5,000/community.

And, how many people are we actually going to serve. In Lunenburg, we offer a very basic Zoom meeting option. Over the last 10 months, the average # of attendees is 1. And will an unexpected result of this bill be that more people choose to attend meetings remotely, thus lessening the ability for Select Boards and governing officials to physically interact with their constituents. That would be a sad trend.

Has the Committee thoroughly engaged with the rural communities in Vermont that would be most challenged by this mandate? In short, it's too costly, too cumbersome and too unattainable. Thank you