

SARAH BRUCE – January 5, 2022 – Open Meeting Law

I could testify if that were appropriate, but today is rather short notice to gather my thoughts. However, I am pretty sure the argument I would make is the same as I e-mailed to Sen McCormack (cc'd to you and Sen Nitka) last July (below). At the August Windsor Cty Dems picnic, I also spoke with Sen Balint and she asked me to forward my July message to her, which I did right after the picnic (mid-August). Please feel free to share the message below as you think is appropriate.

Sarah

Sarah Bruce  
Hartland Energy Committee, Chair

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----- Original Message -----

**Subject:**virtual meetings - value added?

**Date:**2021-07-27 17:29

**From:**brewsterscroft <[brewsterscroft@vermontel.net](mailto:brewsterscroft@vermontel.net)>

**To:**McCormack Dick <[rmccormack@leg.state.vt.us](mailto:rmccormack@leg.state.vt.us)>

**Cc:**Alison Clarkson <[AClarkson@leg.state.vt.us](mailto:AClarkson@leg.state.vt.us)>, Alice Nitka <[anitka@leg.state.vt.us](mailto:anitka@leg.state.vt.us)>

Dear Senator McCormack:

I noted both your passion and your frustration at the June Windsor County Dems Mtg when you reported on the year's legislative work on climate change. I totally agree we must recognize the problem for what it is and get to work! In May, I took over as Chair of the Hartland Energy Committee, so I have really ramped up my activities in this area, including following closely the Vermont CEP update, the Climate Council's development of a Vermont State Climate Action Plan (CAP), and the terrific CAP that is nearing completion in Hartford VT. I am also trying to figure out the best way to get Hartland more engaged and will be addressing the SelectBoard next month about these issues.

I am writing to you today about one thing that I think is a small but important measure of the State's commitment to climate mitigation. As you rightly pointed out at the June WCDems Mtg, transportation is the major source of GHG emissions in Vermont. One way to reduce transportation GHG emissions is to drive less and telecommute more, listed as two of the top five most impactful measures to reduce transportation GHG emissions in the Energy Action Network's *2020-21 Annual Report for Vermont: Emissions, Energy, Equity, and the Economy*. Although many grumble about Zoom meetings, one thing we learned during the pandemic is that virtual meetings are actually very effective. I would argue they are more effective than many in-person meetings. You can hear everything, you can see everyone, and you know who is speaking. In case you did not know the speaker's name, it is right

there in that person's little box. I have learned who many Hartland residents are this way ;-)

As the Chair of the Hartland EC, I and the entire committee were dismayed when we were required by the State to return to in-person meetings as described in Vermont's Open Meeting Laws. I totally agree with the Open Meeting Laws, but I would argue that a Zoom meeting is as open as an in-person meeting – possibly even more open. Anyone with a computer and Internet connection can easily attend and participate – as well as hear what is said and by whom. Even without a computer, anyone can attend and participate by phone, although the visual aspect is of course missing. By contrast, only those that are mobile and have both a vehicle and the extra time needed to travel can attend an in-person meeting. The ease of attendance at a virtual meeting may actually increase public engagement, e.g. a 38% increase in the number of the public in attendance at the Hartland SelectBoard meetings in the 6 months before March 2020 compared to the same 6 months preceding March 2021. However, even more important relative to climate change is the issue of the miles driven getting to and home from an in-person meeting – most likely in single occupancy vehicles. This is in direct contradiction to what we need to do to reduce transportation GHG emissions.

I have not been able to find when the Open Meeting Laws were first written, but I imagine they go back long before the Internet. However, it is also clear that they have been modified in response to the Internet, e-mail, social media, etc. Could it not be possible to further amend them permanently to allow for all-virtual meetings?

Have you seen the small, recently published book titled *A World Made New: Beyond COVID-19 to a low carbon, resilient and inclusive world* by Edward Cameron, a resident of Manchester VT (<https://www.cameronclimate.com/>). Cameron argues that we will make a profound mistake if we simply return to the old status quo post-pandemic. We must use the pandemic as an opportunity to develop a new normal that seriously addresses our many current challenges including climate change and the many faces of social inequity in America. If you have not read this book, I think you would find it a worthwhile read and a source of good new ideas that could shape a better future for us all.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts on these ideas if and when you have time.

Sarah Bruce  
Hartland VT

cc: Senator Clarkson, Senator Nitka