

My name is Wendy Mays and I am the Executive Director of the Vermont Association of Broadcasters.

Thank you for allowing me to speak on behalf of Vermont's free over-the-air television and radio broadcast newsrooms who are dedicated to keeping the public informed with fact-based non-biased local reporting.

We appreciate the thoughtful consideration the Senate Government Operations committee gave when developing S.55 and support this timely examination of Vermont's open meeting law.

Whereas broadcasters support in-person meetings as the gold standard, we recognize that offering a remote option for people who are unable to attend in person makes meetings more accessible to the public. Therefore, broadcasters support the hybrid meeting standard for public bodies created in S.55 and for the most part, support the bill overall.

Society is fortunate that advances in technology now give the public more than one way to participate in their government. But the devil is in the details and that's why we ask this committee to consider adding language that prevents overuse of the remote option by appointed or elected officials.

Appearing at meetings in-person should be the *expectation* of officials while attending remotely should only be used as an acceptable *substitute* in the event the official has a credible reason not to be there in person, like a contagious illness or a family emergency. Otherwise, the concern is that officials will *default* to appearing remotely. Whether it's because it's more convenient to the official's schedule or because the official won't have to interact with the public before or after the meeting, it's human nature to take the path of least resistance, which is what appearing remotely enables.

When humans are in the same room, you can read body language that helps you interpret how someone is reacting to what's being said, you can tell if someone is paying attention and you can generally hear low volume comments. You also have an opportunity to privately ask questions or comment before or after the meeting when you're physically in the same space. The nuance of those human experiences can get lost when you are watching talking heads on a screen.

Lastly, I want to draw your attention to a definition that seems to be missing from the *Official As Passed by the Senate* draft of S.55. In section 2, "Definitions", on Page 4, number (7) "*Quasi-judicial proceeding*" means a proceeding that is:" and then there's nothing. This definition is actually very important because in listening to testimony given to the Senate committee on Government Operations, there were some bodies that were not sure if the work they do could be considered quasi-judicial or not. So we encourage your committee to put that definition back into the bill.

In summary, broadcasters support S.55 overall and only ask that your committee consider adding language that will safeguard against the overuse of the remote option by appointed or elected officials.

Thank you.