

January 18, 2023
Testimony on H.42 to Senate Committee - Trajman

Madame Chair and Senators of the Committee, my name is Omer Trajman. Thank you for inviting me to speak today. I've been a resident of Norwich Vermont for eight years and have worked remotely for much of my career. Since moving to Vermont, I've served on the Norwich finance committee and my wife currently serves on the Norwich School Board. I am a proponent of the value and access that availability of electronic meetings have created for organizations, governments, and citizens alike. I have benefited personally from the adoption of remote meeting technologies. The only reason my family was able to move to Vermont was because I founded a company that fully embraced remote work and electronic meetings, much to the consternation of our investors.

I'm here to address you today regarding Section 2.a. of H.42 related to meetings of a public body without being physically present at a designated meeting location. I'll refer to these as remote meetings or in person or face to face meetings if that's ok. I deeply understand the compelling reasons to expand access to public meetings and highly support the increase in public participation that remote meetings have afforded our communities. However, as numerous studies have shown, organizations that rely exclusively on remote communications, without promoting in person relationships, suffer a negative impact due to reduced overall meeting efficiency and productivity. Public bodies who meet exclusively remotely for extended periods of time run the risk of fundamentally failing at good governance to the detriment of those same communities. I will describe what we've seen starkly in Norwich and encourage you to consider providing guidance and guardrails in this law.

Through my testimony, I hope to encourage you to consider the balance between granting public bodies unlimited flexibility in how they choose to meet, and the risks of abuse and dysfunction when meetings are not held in person at all. Not all public bodies - including our local boards and committees - will always benefit from the education and training to effectively weigh when to meet remotely and when a situation requires a face to face commitment. Though the examples I share may seem like outliers, I believe the greater risk is that, without sufficient structure, public bodies across the State may inadvertently end up in similar situations.

The work that this Committee and the House Committee are doing is critical and has already increased the ability of public bodies to conduct business and has expanded public participation. Governments and organizations around the globe have been struggling with balancing remote versus in person meetings for several years. The increased adoption of technologies to meet remotely has become an important part of our working and private lives.

We've all seen first hand the benefits of meeting remotely and we also know there was a strong motivation by many public bodies, including this one, to return to in person and hybrid meetings. At my remote only company, we discovered, at that time, as much of the world has over the past three years, that tackling difficult questions, bridging gaps in understanding, and reaching consensus, often requires a face to face connection. The Internet has taught us that you may be willing to say things to people online that good sense and humanity would keep you from expressing if you had to look your neighbor in the eye.

As with many towns across the state, Norwich is faced with daunting challenges of hiring and retaining staff while managing a dramatic increase in both the municipal and school budgets. Our Selectboard and School Board have both received considerable interest and opinions by

the public and benefited from the increased participation available because of remote meetings.

The School Board adopted a hybrid approach in 2021, where the quorum of members meet in person and both in person and remote participation is available. The School Board members have successfully engaged in constructive debate and listened to and informed the public throughout this challenging season. There were difficult issues to consider, discussions between parents and administration that influenced the School Board conversations, and the board, by virtue of meeting in person, successfully concluded the budget process. Not everyone was happy, yet everyone felt heard and respected.

In contrast, the Norwich Selectboard is meeting in person tonight for the first time in three years. The reliance on remote only meetings has been to the detriment of our town. While remote meetings are safer and easier to attend, they also create distance among board members and the public. The Norwich Selectboard struggled to make progress on the budget and numerous other issues, due in large part to having a camera and screen as their primary interface to each other and the residents in town. The Selectboard also voted on a budget, yet the process to get there has alienated other elected officials, much of our town staff, and members of the public.

The various town committees that have opted for three consecutive years of remote only meetings have met similar obstacles, while those that returned to in person meetings have been able to make progress on their business. As I'm sure you've experienced, remote meetings are regularly derailed by technology challenges, miscommunication on complex topics, and basic courtesy that is extended even in the most challenging face to face meetings. These are operational challenges, for sure, and other towns may have fared better.

Indeed, at my company, which was fully remote from day zero, we instituted monthly in person meetings for each team in order to build rapport and tackle our bigger problems. Norwich may be an outlier and it may also be a bellwether of what happens when public bodies are free to make uninformed decisions about how to go about governing. I hope this Committee will consider the numerous studies that have shown a significant negative impact to any organization that does not foster face to face relationships. By allowing local public bodies, who may not be sufficiently self aware of the challenges of extended remote only meetings, or lack proper training on how to overcome those challenges, to continue to meet without a physical presence, the Legislature may be inadvertently inviting increased dysfunction into our communities.

I commend the Senate and House Committees on Government Operations for quickly taking up a bill to address the ongoing needs and benefits that allow for remote participation, and I hope you will consider the unforeseen consequences of radically changing how we self-govern. Public bodies meeting in public has worked in Vermont over centuries of plagues and pandemics. Electronic remote access is an empowering advancement that towns should be required to use wisely as an addition to, not a replacement for, regularly meeting and governing face to face. This public body now has the benefit of being able to take the time to discuss and debate in person, and to lay the groundwork for how we use these technologies without accidentally abusing them. Thank you very much for inviting me to speak here today.