

Good morning,

Thank you, Senator Hardy for your quick response. I am pleased to hear about the components of S.55 that would, in my mind, make this bill easier to support. Such as no requirement for hybrid meetings when a public vote is involved, the 2026 timeframe and funds for gearing up. While I still think there might be challenging logistics in staffing these meetings my major concerns have been addressed. I do believe in open/accessible public meetings are a critical component of town government and see this bill as closing that gap in some situations.

Olivia, please feel free to post my email in place of verbal testimony and thank you for the open communication.

Thank you,
Sheila Duranleau
Chair, Washington Selectboard

On Tuesday, February 13, 2024 at 10:13:30 PM EST, Ruth Hardy <rhardy@leg.state.vt.us> wrote:

Hi Sheila,

Thank you for your email and sharing your concerns about the current version of S.55. We are certainly familiar with the complexities of hybrid meetings and are trying to address them in the bill. It seems as if VLCT did not include many of the details contained in the bill that would address your concerns.

The bill would include funding to support the purchase of equipment and training for town officials, and also only requires hybrid meetings for public boards with legislative, quasi-judicial, or financial responsibilities, such as the full selectboard or school board, so the vast majority of public committees and boards would still be able to meet fully remotely or in-person only. It also would not fully take effect until 2026, so there's time to make the adjustments necessary.

The bill would not require hybrid meetings for annual town meetings or meetings where there is a vote of the public. In the current version of the bill, there is a study committee that would make recommendations about how to make annual meetings more accessible and improve participation, but we don't require hybrid format for such meetings. Meetings with public vote are much more complicated to do in a hybrid format.

We know that not everyone has access to a computer or the skills or broadband to attend remote meetings, which is why we are favoring hybrid meetings, which would allow people to attend in the way that works best for them. It's important that we

balance the challenges for town officials with the needs of the public for open and accessible public meetings. Not everyone can attend in person and not everyone can attend online, so hybrid meetings would best accommodate everyone. And, we also know that hybrid meetings can be challenging to run, so are trying to make accommodations as appropriate.

We know that there are likely challenges for some towns, and we want to hear from a variety of town officials with different needs. As you can imagine, we've been hearing from a lot of selectboard members after the VLCT sent its alert last week. We got testimony from several of them today. We're hearing more testimony on S.55 on Friday afternoon, and could also likely accommodate you on another afternoon. Would you like to testify? If you'd rather not testify, would you like the email you sent to the committee to be posted in place of verbal testimony? We want to be sure that town officials and members of the public feel heard and part of these important discussions. I've copied our committee assistant, Olivia Parker, on this email. She can make arrangements to schedule or post your testimony. Thanks again for reaching out.
My best,
Ruth

Ruth Hardy(she/her)
Vermont State Senator, Addison District

Subject: [External] S.55 An act relating to authorizing public bodies to meet electronically under Vermont's Open Meeting Law

[External]

Dear Committe Members,
Thank you for your attention to this matter and for carving out some compromises in certain situations. I am the chair of the Washington Selectboard, and I am writing to share the challenges that I see for our small town if we are required to have a hybrid option for all open meetings.

1. Currently we hold our selectboard meetings in a medium size room in the town hall. We have 1 laptop that we do use for the hybrid participation. We utilize the Zoom platform. However, if we have a meeting that requires a public vote, we use the school gymnasium. If you recall for a moment, your past experiences in a school gym, you will probably remember that the acoustics are terrible. Even if we could afford to fit up the gym with the required technology, I doubt that people participating virtually would be able to hear and follow along with the meeting. It is difficult to hear when we are present in the gym.

2. We have no idea if the school would even consider this an option. And if so, how much it would cost, but we do know with our current financial situation, we can't afford it.

3. How can a moderator, calling for a voice vote from the floor, accurately determine the outcome of a vote when people are voting virtually?

4. What if someone calls for the vote to go Australian ballot? This happens quite often in large or controversial matters. How will the people participating virtually vote by ballot?

5. Should this requirement become law it just might be the thing that pushes small towns to move from town meeting in-person gatherings to casting all votes by Australian ballot. It would be a shame for towns too make this decision based on a legislative mandate instead of what is in the best interest of their town.

Thank you for considering my concerns.

Sheila Duranleau
Chair, Washington Selectboard

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