



27 February 2024

MEMO TO: Senator Ruth Hardy and Members of Senate Government Operations Committee

FROM: Lauren-Glenn Davitian, Vermont Access Network, davitian@cctv.org

RE: Testimony Related to S. 55 V. 4.2: Amendment to Vermont’s Open Meeting Law to authorize public bodies to meet through electronic means without designating a physical meeting location

My name is Lauren-Glenn Davitian and I serve as Public Policy Director for CCTV Center for Media + Democracy, based in Burlington and work on behalf of Vermont’s 24 community media centers (also known as access management organizations “AMOs”) which operate as Vermont Access Network (“VAN”).

VAN is a statewide nonprofit organization that represents its members in matters of mutual concern, including the effective operation and advancement of Public, Educational and Government (PEG) access services throughout the State. Please see: <https://vermontaccess.net/>

- Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony Related to [S. 55 v. 4.2: Amendment to Vermont’s Open Meeting Law](#).

We offer the following recommendations for the modernization of public meetings and local democracy described in S. 55 V. 4.2:

1. Public Access to Meeting Recordings

Section 312(3)(A) - For the purpose of public access and the ability of VAN

members to preserve particular public meetings that they may not have recorded, it would be worthwhile to clarify that meeting recordings that are saved for 30 days *be publicly accessible for download and review*.

We recommend that this be added to Section 2640 (2) Annual Meetings and Section 2680 (h)(3) Australian Ballot Hearings.

2. Composition of Working Group

Section 7 Working Group on Participation and Accessibility of Municipal Public Meetings and Elections - Given VAN's expertise in designing, implementing and operating public meeting coverage for more than 150 Vermont cities and towns, *we'd like to offer two members to participate as part of the Working Group*.

VAN can offer expertise in these areas:

- a. Technical setup recommendations that are easy to use and feasible for a public body; and,
- b. Methods to make accessible and understandable the recording of the event/meeting both live and as an archival asset; and,
- c. Procedures to make make meetings/events accessible and inclusive.

3. Reorganization of Working Group Responsibilities and Scope

Under the Powers and Duties of the Working Group, we recommend that the bill distinguish between the responsibilities that address best practices for running hybrid meetings and investigations meant to broaden public participation. The second category appears to be broad and ambitious and should be considered in relation to time frame and resources available to the Working Group.

(c) Powers and duties. The Working Group shall:

(1) recommend best practices for public officials to:

(A) ~~running~~ effective and inclusive meetings and ~~maximizeing~~ participation and accessibility in electronic, hybrid, and in-person annual meetings and meetings of public bodies, including:

~~(4)~~ (a) ~~study~~ assess the current level of accessibility to the physical locations and

polling places where annual meetings and meetings of public bodies are held and what improvements are necessary for siting these locations for the purposes specified in section (A);

~~(3)~~ (b) identify the technical assistance, equipment, and training necessary for ~~municipalities~~ public bodies to run effective and inclusive public meetings;

(c) recording meetings of municipal public bodies and the means and timeline for posting and preserving those recordings for public access; and

~~(2)~~ investigate means for increasing voter interest in serving on local public bodies;

~~(5)~~ (2) study and evaluate the feasibility of:

(A) using electronic platforms to support remote attendance and voting at annual meetings; and

(B) expanding use of the Australian ballot system for increased voter participation in local elections; and

~~(6)~~ (C) investigate whether increased use of accommodations such as childcare, hearing devices, translators, transportation, food, and hybrid meetings could increase participation in local public meetings; and

(D) investigate means for increasing voter interest in serving on local public bodies; and

~~(7)~~ (E) study other topics as determined by the group that could improve participation and access to local ~~public meetings.~~ meetings of public bodies.

Thank you for your consideration and effort to open the doors of local democracy to all.