

VERMONT ACCESS NETWORK

17 January 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: 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 am the founding Executive Director of CCTV Center for Media + Democracy, now serving as CCTV's Public Policy Director and working 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](#): Amendment to Vermont's Open Meeting Law to authorize public bodies to meet through electronic means without designating a physical meeting location.

Each of Vermont's 24 community media centers plays an important role in the facilitation of what we call "streaming democracy", that is the production and distribution of local government meetings. During the COVID pandemic we assisted more than 150 cities and towns with the pivot to online meetings. Since that time, we have worked with our local partners to make the transition to hybrid meeting coverage for towns, school boards and countless community events.

VAN members provide technical support, and in many cases, the equipment to conduct these meetings. We also assist with advice about how to make meetings

conducted in this format as easy as possible for the public to access and participate in.

From our experience, remote access to public meetings are necessary for those who, for a variety of reasons, are not able to attend in-person.

The *hybrid* meeting provides the broadest opportunity for public participation.

There are many towns in Vermont that still do not have satisfactory broadband connections to enable fully remote participation. We could all agree that attending a meeting by telephone is a last resort. The quality of speaker phone equipment is often sub par, and people who participate in this manner are likely to have a difficult time following the meetings.

VAN recommends that fully remote meetings should not be a first option but could be allowed under certain conditions. We support S. 55 if it is amended to include conditions for running a remote meeting in the event of a natural disaster, anticipated weather events, credible threat to the safety of members or occurrences that make a physical location difficult to achieve.

VAN supports the Secretary of State's recommendation for a fund to enable more Vermont local public bodies to hold hybrid meetings. Ideally, this fund would finance:

- Equipment (laptops, cameras, required software),
- Subscription services (Zoom or another platform),
- Technical support (for set up and maintenance),
- Training (in how to facilitate remote meetings, connecting to YouTube, archiving practices), and,
- Archiving (management and storage for the preservation of public meetings).

Regarding the archiving of video meetings. There are low cost ways to preserve video files. Once the meetings are streamed on a town or city's YouTube channel, they can also be uploaded to Internet Archive at no charge for long term preservation. Many municipalities use customized platforms such as Civic Clerk which allows for the storage of video at a cost. The bigger issue is the management of the files and archiving protocols, which require some planning and consideration.

It is important that for either fully remote or hybrid meetings that we institute

archival policies that ensure the long term preservation and access to meeting records. VAN has been working with the Secretary of State's office to develop best practices that don't rely on either expensive or unreliable (e.g., YouTube) technology.

This may be addressed by the State Archivist, but my VAN colleagues could say more about this at your convenience.

Vermont's community media centers stand by to support the expansion of hybrid public meetings.

In the meantime, we support H. 55 with the conditions detailed above.

Thank you.