

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 this committee has already given to S.55 and support this timely examination of Vermont's open meeting law as opposed to extending Act 1.

In-person meetings provide the best overall experience for both the public body and members of the public who attend. When you are in the same room, you can read body language that gives you an idea of what someone may be thinking and you can request to ask a question or request to make a comment on what's being discussed. You also have an opportunity to privately ask questions or make comments after the meeting is over. The nuance of those human experiences get lost when you are watching talking heads on a screen.

However, recognizing that busy schedules and disparities between economic resources make it so that not everyone is able to attend in-person meetings, we are fortunate that advances in technology now give the public two ways to participate in their government.

Therefore, broadcasters support hybrid meetings as the most accessible type of meeting and appreciate the work your committee is doing to codify that as a requirement for public bodies moving forward.

However, the devil is in the details and that's where we ask that this committee remain mindful. There are two areas we feel S.55 could use some more work and that is the 1) clarification of what constitutes an "advisory body" and 2) adding safeguards to prevent overuse of the remote option by officials.

First, clearly defining what constitutes an "advisory body". While listening to the testimony you have already taken, as well as testimony that was given in the House on H.649, I have heard confusion about whether or not a certain body could or should be considered "Quasi-judicial", meaning sometimes they are doing that type of work and sometimes they are not. We encourage this committee to more clearly define "advisory bodies" so that no public body is left to wonder or misinterpret whether they fall into that definition.

Second, adding safeguards to prevent overuse of the remote option by officials. We encourage this committee to add language that would make in-person meetings the expectation with participation electronically as an acceptable substitute in the event a member of the public body has a credible reason not to be there in person, like a contagious illness or a family emergency. Otherwise, we are concerned members of the public body will consistently 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. To be clear, broadcasters feel the electronic meeting component should be utilized to increase access to and participation by the *public*, not to make it more "convenient" for officials.

Other than those two areas we feel need more work, we applaud the timely examination of Vermont's open meeting law by this committee and welcome a continued conversation about how to make government more accessible to all Vermonters.