

Remote Meeting Access and Local Governments: Operationalizing at the Town and Village Level

Towns and villages throughout the Tug Hill region and beyond pivoted in 2020 to holding municipal meetings remotely. This was enabled by a series of executive orders that suspended the portion of NYS's Open Meetings Law requiring all board members to be physically present at board meetings, or, if not present at the municipal building and joining by videoconference, to publicize their alternative physical location and allow the public to attend at any such location.

Now that vaccines are widely available and local COVID infection rates are dropping, many communities are back to holding in-person meetings but want to still allow for remote attendance. Remote options have allowed for broader public participation, more convenient attendance by experts (attorneys, engineers, etc.), and helped board members to still attend who are out of the area for some reason.

The Tug Hill Commission staff has organized and hosted meetings via Zoom for many towns and villages during the COVID pandemic. This service allowed for staff to continue providing technical assistance to the region's communities. However, as daily life returns to normal the demands on staff to attend meetings in-person and pick up on projects that were set aside during COVID is placing a strain on staff resources.

We are encouraging communities that want to keep offering remote meeting access to set up the necessary infrastructure. **Starting July 1, commission staff will be significantly scaling back their hosting of remote meetings.**

Things to consider if a community wants to keep offering remote meeting access include:

1. **Video display.** How will remote participants be visible/audible at the in-person meeting? A smart TV or screen/projector system allows the remote participants to be viewed by the in-person meeting attendees.
2. **Camera.** The in-person meeting will need to be captured with a camera either built-in or connected to a laptop, tablet or smartphone. Most of these devices will also have a microphone built in, to capture the audio in the meeting.
3. **Microphone.** One of the biggest complaints of remote participants is not being able to hear what is being said by the in-person attendees. A multi-directional microphone used by in-person attendees can significantly improve the ability of remote participants to hear.
4. **Speakerphone.** If your remote participants are joining via the phone, a speakerphone can help them be heard in the room, and help the in-person attendees be heard remotely.
5. **Remote meeting platform.** A subscription to a remote meeting platform such as Zoom is required to support video, if meetings will take longer than a certain period of time, or if recording, streaming, or transcribing is required. A Zoom pro license currently costs \$150/year. Other options are available as well.
6. **Conference call number.** If remote participants will join only via audio, a conference call number could be an option. Please note that under normal operations of the Open Meetings Law, attendance by board members via phone is not considered as "attendance" and these board members DO NOT count toward a quorum and ARE NOT able to vote.

While the current executive orders require meetings to be recorded and later transcribed, and NYS Archives guidance states that transcripts need to be kept for four months, experience is that transcripts generated by Zoom or other applications are not very accurate. If the meeting is recorded, a transcript could be generated on an as requested basis, which should allow communities a wider range of options to conduct their remote meetings.

Please contact your circuit rider or other commission staff members you may have been working with for help.