

AN ACT TO MODERNIZE PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC MEETINGS

H3040 & S2024 | Rep. Denise Garlick & Sen. Jason Lewis

IT'S TIME TO UPDATE THE OPEN MEETING LAW

Since early 2020, the Legislature has suspended provisions of the Open Meeting Law to enable public bodies to carry out their responsibilities remotely, with virtual access and participation by members of the public. As good government practices have evolved, many public bodies have combined the best of old and new, enabling both in-person and remote attendance.

When this temporary suspension expires at the end of March 2023, we should not regress to in-person meetings only. Nor should we switch exclusively to virtual meetings. It's time for permanent reform that embraces hybrid meeting practices, expanding transparency and participation for the public and officials alike.

An Act to Modernize Participation in Public Meetings will ensure greater access to open meetings for everyone – particularly for people with disabilities, caregiving responsibilities, and limited transportation – by allowing officials and members of the public to attend meetings in person or remotely.

The bill gives municipalities more than five years to achieve this goal **and** creates a trust fund to help them finance it.

HYBRID ACCESS SHOULD BE THE NEW NORMAL

In many communities across the state, remote and hybrid meetings significantly and equitably increased public participation in local government.

- Remote access removes long-standing barriers to participation for residents with disabilities, seniors, people with limited access to transportation, and people with work and family obligations that prevent them from getting to and spending hours at municipal buildings.
- Access to public meetings should never again hinge on a person's physical mobility, or their ability to afford a car, get time off work, or find a care provider.
- At the same time, it's a proud Massachusetts tradition for people to gather in community to make important community decisions.
- We can enrich our democratic process, ensure access for all, and increase public participation by blending remote and in-person meetings.

FEASIBLE, AFFORDABLE & FINANCED

An Act to Modernize Participation in Public Meetings will:

- Phase in hybrid meetings, prioritizing state agencies and elected municipal bodies
- Require universal compliance by 2030
- Allow municipalities to seek economic hardship waivers for non-elected bodies unable to provide hybrid meetings
- Create a Municipal Hybrid Meeting Trust Fund to administer a grant program that will help municipalities finance their modernization efforts.

We can't go backward. Let's keep the door open for everyone who wants to participate in their government.