

Public Meetings in NY and COVID-19

Local governments need to keep doing business during this public health crisis. Commission staff have compiled some information and references in this document to help towns and villages figure out their next steps. This will be an evolving document, so please check back regularly. Contact your circuit rider if you need more assistance.

TAKE AWAYS

Still need to public notice meetings – sample language can be found in this document

Given Executive Order 202.1 and subsequent orders to limit groups of 10 or more, holding meetings via webinar or conference calling, where the public can join in, should be seriously considered

Until this crisis passes, only deal with items at board meetings that are necessary to keep government functioning

Link to Governor Cuomo [Executive Order 202.1](#) Issued March 7, 2020

“Suspension of law allowing the attendance of meetings telephonically or other similar service:

- Article 7 of the Public Officers Law, to the extent necessary to permit any public body to meet and take such actions authorized by the law without permitting in public in-person access to meetings and authorizing such meetings to be held remotely by conference call or similar service, provided that the public has the ability to view or listen to such proceeding and that such meetings are recorded and later transcribed;”

Association of Towns of NYS [guidance](#)

“Town Board Meetings and Coronavirus *Scheduling and Cancellation*:

The town board may schedule meetings by resolution and may cancel meetings by resolution (Town Law, §§63, 64). The town board should review its rules of procedure and other board resolutions and protocols regarding meeting cancelations. In the event the board does not have an established meeting cancelation procedure, the board could consider adopting such a meeting cancelation policy. In the event a meeting scheduled by the town board needs to be canceled but the town board is unable to convene to do so, the town board could consider adopting a resolution delegating to the supervisor the authority to cancel a town board scheduled meeting. The delegation must put forth the procedures and criteria for the supervisor to cancel a meeting scheduled by the town board. In

addition, the supervisor may schedule and cancel special town board meetings (Town Law, §62). As with all board actions and protocols, we recommend working with the town attorney for guidance and advice.”

NY Conference of Mayors [guidance](#)

“Public Officers Law § 102[1] defines a “meeting” as “the official convening of a public body for the purpose of conducting public business.” Historically, this meant that the members of the public body physical gathered to conduct business, but in 2000, Section 102 was amended to allow public body members to attend and participate in meetings via videoconferencing. Pursuant to Public Officers Law § 103, any time a quorum of a public body gathers (either in person or via videoconference) for the purpose of discussing public business, the meeting must be open to the general public, whether or not the body intends to take action. This includes “workshops,” “work sessions,” and “agenda sessions.” Chance meetings or social gatherings are not covered by the law since these are not official meetings; however, public officials should not discuss public business at chance meetings or social gatherings.

In addition, Public Officers Law § 104 requires public bodies to notify the public of the time and place of every meeting. The OML requires notice of every meeting to be:

1. Conspicuously posted in one or more public locations;
2. Given to the news media (television, radio and newspaper); and
3. Conspicuously posted on the village’s website, if it has the ability to do so.

Moreover, Open Meetings Law § 104(4) provides that if videoconferencing is used to conduct the meeting, the notice of the meeting must indicate that members of the public body will be participating via videoconferencing technology. Additionally, the notice must identify the locations from which the members will be participating and state that the public has the right to attend the meeting at any of the meeting locations. The OML does NOT require public bodies to pay for an official advertisement in a newspaper. Rather, the OML merely requires that the news media be notified. NYCOM recommends that public bodies fax or email meeting notices to the news media.”

“A Summary of Meeting Options During the COVID-19 Pandemic

As a result of Executive Order 202.1, public bodies, such as city councils and village boards of trustees, now have three options for conducting meetings:

1. Members of the public body are either physically present or participating via videoconferencing, and the general public is allowed to physically attend the meeting location(s) as is provided for under the Open Meetings Law;

2. Members of the public body are physically present but the general public is not allowed to physically attend the meeting location; the public must be allowed to view or listen to such meetings and the public body must record and later transcribe such meetings; or

3. Members of the public body meet via conference call or videoconference, with no in-person location; the public must be allowed to listen to or view such meetings and the public body must record and later transcribe such meetings.

The Executive Order does not indicate by when the recordings must be transcribed. Local officials are encouraged to have the meetings transcribed within a reasonable time, given the circumstances. Moreover, the public bodies must still prepare the meeting minutes within two weeks of the meeting, and within one week of an executive session. The notice for these meetings must clearly state the specifics of the meeting (e.g., how it is taking place, where it is taking place, what technology is going to be used, and how the public may listen to or view the meeting if method two or three is going to be used). Additionally, if a public body is using method two or three, it should clearly state that it is conducting the meeting in that manner pursuant to Governor Cuomo's Executive Order 202.1.

"while State law does not expressly allow public bodies to conduct a meeting without allowing the public to be actually present, ***if local officials deem that conducting in-person meetings would threaten public health, they should limit non-in-person meetings to discussions and actions of business which must be conducted to keep the local government operating and to protect the public's health, safety, and welfare.*** Moreover, public bodies should consider implementing technology that allows the public to observe such meetings via web-based video technology. Alternatively, public bodies may wish to consider minimizing the number of attendees at meetings or holding meetings in larger venues so that the recommended minimum social distancing of 6 feet may be maintained by members of the public who do attend the meeting. See below for more recommendations for conducting in- person meetings."

Public Hearings and COVID-19 (from NYCOM)

The common meaning of a public hearing is to allow for in-person public comment, although written comments should always be accepted and even encouraged. Some local officials have inquired whether an online video portal or teleconference that offered the opportunity for the public to comment could be employed in place of an in-person public hearing. In normal times, under normal circumstances, NYCOM is of the opinion that State mandated public hearings must always have a reasonable opportunity for the public to comment in person before the public body. These, however, are not normal times or normal conditions. **Public bodies must balance the need to take action with the right of the public to attend a public hearing in person. If a public body determines that, in the interest of the public safety, an in-person public hearing should not be held,**

then the public body should take steps to allow the public a meaningful opportunity to comment at a hearing.

While there is no case law to support this position, **if a public body gives the public a reasonable opportunity to submit meaningful comment via online videoconferencing technology and in writing via email, local officials are likely to have a strong case should their actions be challenged.** If local officials decide to allow for in-person public participating at a public hearing, they could impose a limit on the maximum number of individuals allowed at a hearing based upon the capacity of the meeting room. If local officials consider implementing such a limit, they should establish a policy whereby individuals interested in speaking in person can sign-up and then be selected randomly. Individuals who are not selected to participate in-person should be given the opportunity to participate via video or teleconference and to submit written comments.

Local officials are strongly encouraged to consult with their municipal attorney before undertaking any course of action that is not expressly set forth in State law or one of the Governor's Executive Orders.

Technology Tools

1. Zoom Meetings – Has set up a specific page to provide assistance during the pandemic

<https://zoom.us/docs/en-us/covid19.html>

2. Workplace for Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/workplace/resources/ways-to-work/collaboration/hosting-meetings>

3. Konveio – Using Zoom, YouTube, and Konveio together to allow stakeholders to participate in meetings and give feedback on initiatives from home. This overview and detailed tutorials walks the user through key considerations and setup.

<https://konve.io/blog>

Zoom is a great webinar tool that allows you to host a public meeting with multiple presenters. The presenters can be in different locations, which means they can participate from the convenience of their homes as well. Besides sharing your screen to show a presentation, you can mute and unmute participants and allow them to participate in discussions or live polls. One considerable drawback is that participants need to install the software in order to join the meeting.

This is where [YouTube](#) Live Stream comes in. It's a great way to sync and directly stream your Zoom webinar to YouTube, which is accessible to anybody and does not require any software downloads or logins. The webinar is also automatically ready to be replayed immediately afterward for those who could not watch the live meeting.

Lastly, [Konveio](#) provides a convenient option to collect specific input on content either during or after the meeting has ended. It is easy to upload PowerPoint presentations, poster boards, PDFs, and other content to a Konveio digital workshop. This enables people to participate online at their convenience and comment directly on specific pages of the materials or fill out dot voting forms for as long as you'd like to accept feedback.

SAMPLE Language for public meeting postings:

Because of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Emergency and State and Federal bans on large meetings or gatherings and pursuant to Governor Cuomo's Executive Order 220.1 issued on March 12, 2020 suspending the Open Meetings Law, the [Name of Board] (the "Agency") [Board] [Committee] Meeting scheduled for _____, 2020 will be held electronically via [conference call][webinar] instead of a public meeting open for the public to attend in person. Members of the public may [listen to] or [view] the [Board] [Committee] meeting by [insert instructions to dial into the conference call or log into the webinar]. Minutes of the [Board] [Committee] Meeting will transcribed and posted on the [Agency's] website.

[Attach Agenda here.]