



Virginia Press
Association



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Dear Members of the Freedom of Information Advisory Council —

Thank you for calling a meeting for next week and for the efforts you are putting forth to continue the Council's important work during such extraordinary times.

As the pandemic shut down the interactions between government and citizens — from canceled classes to locked buildings to no in-person meetings — many citizens in the Commonwealth attained a new appreciation for the access they may have previously taken for granted.

Local governments in particular, but also school districts, regional public bodies and state boards and commissions are to be commended for working together to adopt new ways of reaching out to and informing the public. Many states around the country saw widespread abuse of the changed circumstances to meet in private and make decisions without public oversight.

Not so in Virginia, thanks to an existing law governing electronic meetings during emergencies, quick advice from the attorney general's office, budget amendments approved by the legislative and executive branches and collaborative problem-solving among government attorneys, access advocates and Virginia's press association.

The budget amendments governing electronic meetings during the pandemic are, by definition, temporary. We cannot assume, however, that another long-term emergency will never again take place.

Therefore, we write to request that the FOIA Council's electronic meetings subcommittee be tasked with reviewing the language adopted during the veto session and crafting a permanent legislative proposal for 2021 that will address how and when public bodies can meet electronically during a prolonged health related emergency.

Providing certainty in uncertain times — for the public, press and government itself — would benefit us now and well into the future.

Sincerely,

Megan Rhyne
Virginia Coalition for Open Government



Betsy Edwards
Virginia Press Association