

From: **Abigail Fox** <abbydfox@gmail.com>

Date: Sun, Nov 8, 2020 at 5:33 PM

Subject: please expand electronic participation opportunities in VA's public bodies

To: <foiacouncil@dls.virginia.gov>

Dear FOIA Council,

I am writing to you today to express my support for removing the restrictive state limit for how often members of a governmental advisory board can participate in meetings electronically.

This is in reference to this part of Virginia Code:

<https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/title2.2/chapter37/section2.2-3708.2/>

Professionals in every sector have learned in 2020, thanks to COVID, how easy it is to keep in touch with colleagues and clients from a distance. It's true that face-to-face communication has its advantages over remote communication, and we all miss seeing our coworkers in person. But no doubt, we've also learned this year how effective and efficient remote communication can be in many cases. We've had to adapt to this year's challenges; but I've learned firsthand, how well the work can and will go on; and how easily, with a little practice and adjustment, that people can be trained and have dialogues and discussions over ZOOM as well as in conference rooms.

That's why I think the FOIA Council should not object to expanding the number of times in a year that people serving in advisory councils and committees can serve the public while participating in meetings remotely.

As a working person I've learned that life happens. Sometimes a family member is ill and you need to stay close to them. Sometimes your spouse isn't available to watch the kids after work and you need to be home to help out. Maybe your pet has a health issue and you want to keep one eye on them. Maybe a meeting at the office ran late and you don't have time to go to your public meeting in person, but you could quickly hop on a ZOOM call. If you have a good Internet connection, this is not a big deal. You can still do your business, even if a family member who needs you is in the other room.

If we want to draw from the greatest number of qualified and eligible professionals when appointing and filling board positions, if we want the best minds in the Commonwealth tackling some of our greatest challenges, we need to accept that today's professionals have more than one commitment in their lives to juggle, but that does not make them any less effective in their jobs. It's just the nature of the work-life balance in 2020 that people cannot always meet in person; it doesn't mean they can't do their work (well.)

True, for many people it's been a brave new world this year, how much work life and home life have blurred. But we've learned that some of that blurring isn't all bad. We've saved time and energy not driving to and from every appointment and meeting. We've managed maybe better than we expected to; and in spite of the challenges, we've learned ways to save time and save money. Let's take this lesson learned and apply it to how we conceive that meetings can be effectively conducted statewide now and into the future.

The public benefits from a government, including advisory bodies, that reflects its population and includes a diversity of voices and experiences, including those who have children,

dependent parents, or have long daily commutes. Having a commute or having kids shouldn't be a barrier to public service.

I understand legislators may want to put guardrails on any legislation on this topic. Perhaps you could require attendees to inform all their fellow board members 12 or 24 hours notice in advance if they can't meet in person. Perhaps you could put a cap on the number of remote meetings people can request - for example, perhaps people could try to attend meetings in person at least once a month. Or why don't we consider leaving it up to individual committee members to decide for themselves how necessary it is to always meet in person. (I'm sure if a person isn't showing up at meetings, the chair of a committee can ask that absentee person to step down.) Just as long as we aren't making it impossible for those who have an urgent family matter, or a disability, or who don't have reliable transportation, as long as we aren't making it impossible for them to participate civically, we could be bringing Virginia a long way into the modern era.

I'm happy to put my name on the record in support of modernizing Virginia law on this issue.

You are welcome to contact me, Abby Fox at:
abbydfox@gmail.com / 571-268-3271 / 220 S. Washington Street Alexandria, VA 22314.

Thank you for your consideration!

Take care,
Abby