

Commentary

The case for making virtual public meetings permanent

By SCOTT BEYER

The coronavirus shutdowns have made many things virtual: school, work, church, even real-estate tours. Local governments, like other institutions, have an obligation to continue to conduct business, so for five months now they too have relied on various forms of virtual meetings.



Beyer

Online public hearings and other meetings have become a common practice nationwide, using a variety of videoconferencing services. As is usually the case when new technology is rolled out quickly, there have been setbacks, glitches and unexpected consequences. Rural areas often struggle with slow Internet. Trolls have Zoombombed some public hearings. But overall the process has been a relatively inexpensive and effective way, particularly for larger municipalities, to continue public business in a challenging time.

The question, as has been asked in

many contexts through 2020, is why can't this COVID-19-era innovation become permanent? Rather than return to the hassle of holding most public meetings in person, why not continue to make them remote?

The first advantage is that it reduces costs, which is one of the reasons many businesses are planning to institutionalize remote work, continuing it on a large scale after the pandemic passes. There'd be less overhead for governments — reduced costs for building maintenance, electricity, security personnel and so on.

Second is that it would increase public access and participation. A common criticism of public meetings is that their participants represent only a small segment of the community: the people who have time to go to public meetings. A Boston University study found that attendees at planning and zoning hearings were disproportionately older, wealthier homeowners. A working-class couple that's raising kids won't have time to attend these meetings, as they're often held during the day and last multiple hours.

A third advantage seems less obvious, but is important: It would go a long way toward preventing public meetings from devolving into emotional train wrecks.

I've traveled the country and attended many local-government meetings, so I can attest that while most of them remain calm and public officials generally act professionally, that can't always be said of the audience.

Government buildings are usually downtown, so meetings attract homeless people who have mental issues and can be disruptive. The larger disruption, though, typically comes from otherwise-buttoned-up residents who get inflamed over certain issues. They'll march to the chamber, metaphorical pitchforks in hand, ready to make the most of their allotted speaking time.

People in the majority opinion among meeting attendees play to the crowd, organizing chants, using their kids as political props and disrupting the discussion with noisy stunts (such as this "tree murder" performance in Seattle). People who are in the minority opinion but may have worthwhile things to say endure booing and hissing. For this reason some may not even get up to speak. It's a setting that fosters intimidation, monoculture and groupthink. Leaders are pressured into pleasing one loud interest group.

Land-use hearings are particularly prone to this. While there may be wide public

support for more multi-family housing, since many people recognize the home shortage and affordability crisis in their cities, most of those who typically show up for a project hearing are single-family homeowners who live nearby and are likeliest to rile things up. Often, it's just NIMBYism, but it's what elected officials get exposed to, compelling them to vote against projects that would help meet larger community interests.

The beauty of virtual meetings is that they reduce this emotion factor. If people could testify virtually instead of with their backs to a hostile crowd, they'd be more comfortable speaking.

Despite all these benefits, in-person public meetings are likely not going away. The main counter-argument is that, online-only meetings exclude those without Internet access.

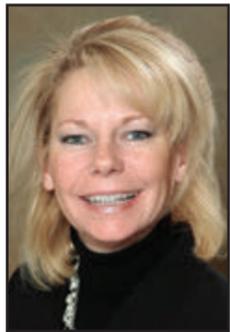
A happy medium would be to hold in-person meetings but offer the option to attend and comment virtually. Officials will be able to hear a greater diversity of opinion, and members of the public will get the chance to calmly state their views while physically separate from the public-chamber mobs. The result is likely to be better public policy.

Scott Beyer is urban issues columnist for Governing.

Why offering dental benefits matters even more during a pandemic

By KARYN GLOGOWSKI

Nearly half of employers nationwide are strengthening health and wellness benefits so employees can more easily get the care they need during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Glogowski

Workplace perks like complimentary beverages, food and on-site gyms are great. But with many people still working from home, some of these office benefits may be of less value to employees. Many employees are seeking job security and a competitive benefits package to help them stay healthy during these times.

Here are reasons your business should continue offering dental benefits:

Preventive care is key to employees' health and productivity.

Taking care of your employees' health goes beyond the coronavirus. It's about taking preventive steps to protect their health and well-being. That includes good oral health care. Over the past few years, employees missed an average of three to four days of work each year due to an unexpected dental issue. Those with good oral health are more likely to be more productive and miss fewer days of work. And those with dental coverage are 58 percent more likely to get the preventive care they need.

Yet during this pandemic, some employees may have delayed routine dental checkups. Make sure they know it's still important to receive preventive care. Infection control has always been a priority for dentists and additional safety measures are recommended, so employees should feel confident scheduling a checkup.

Dental insurance can help save employers and employees money in the long run.

More than 8 out of 10 Americans agree having dental coverage saves

them money in the long run. That's true, in part, because dental insurance provides employees access to a dental network that allows them to take advantage of reduced or pre-established fees. In addition, most dental plans cover 100 percent of preventive care including routine checkups, X-rays and cleanings. It's a great investment in your employees' health. Every dollar spent on preventive care can help save money and avoid more costly, urgent and complex procedures.

Oral health is key to employees' overall well-being.

A vast majority of employers (93 percent) say making health care more affordable is a top priority. Because of the connection between oral and overall health, dental benefits can help. Research shows a greater use of dental benefits can lower overall medical costs, especially among those with chronic conditions. During an oral exam, dentists can detect signs of more than 120 diseases — including heart disease, diabetes and oral

cancer — which have symptoms that appear in the mouth. Early detection and treatment can prevent oral and overall health issues from getting worse.

Offering dental benefits can help attract and retain talent.

Nearly nine out of 10 (88 percent) employees say better health, dental and vision benefits are their top consideration when choosing a job. That means offering dental benefits can not only keep your current employees productive and healthy — it can also keep your business competitive for hiring and retaining talent.

For more information about dental coverage and how to make the most of dental benefits, visit deltadentalil.com/plans.

Karyn Glogowski is senior vice president of Delta Dental of Illinois. Delta Dental covers one in three Americans who have dental insurance. Delta Dental of Illinois is one of 39 member companies that make up the national Delta Dental system.

Letters to the editor

Daiber is leader needed for the job

My name is Chuck Noud. I am the president of the Granite City Federation of Teachers, Local 743 and state vice president for the Illinois Federation of Teachers. I am a veteran educator of over 20 years and the father of a middle school student. I am writing this letter in support of Bob Daiber for Madison County chairman.

Now, more than ever, the people of Madison County need leadership. Over the years that I have known Dr. Daiber, I have always recognized his unwavering commitment to education and the importance of doing everything that we can for our young people. As a lifelong educator, vocational teacher, and Regional Superintendent of Madison County, Bob exhibited passionate support for our schools, teachers, and parents in order to create educational communities, ripe with opportunities for our young people. Dr. Daiber continues to be an advocate for our students and families. Bob Daiber is the candidate that will lead the Madison County Board to support education and our communities.

CHUCK NOUD
President, Granite City
Federation of Teachers
Vice President,
Illinois Federation of Teachers

Centene article was important

Congratulations on an extremely important article in the September issue of the IBJ (Alan Ortbal's column, "Centene sends up giant distress flare"). You hit the nail right on the head. Too bad so few people read this journal. Mostly business leadership reads this journal, but then they probably know about and see the deep slide St. Louis is in. As far as the rest of the population, fewer and fewer even subscribe to a newspaper. If they can't get it in a five-second tweet, they don't think they need it or pay attention to it.

Some of the outlying papers, local venues, would serve their readership to reprint it as well.

I was born in St. Louis, grew up on the East Side of the River, and went to college in St. Louis, but it becomes increasingly difficult to "brag about St. Louis." I hate to be so partisan, but what makes us think we can continue to elect the same party and get a different result? The Dems have been in charge for the past 50 years and the only thing the city has done is deteriorate. What we need is law and order and proper, civilized behavior. Not that anyone is keeping score, but how many businesses have abandoned St. Louis? And yet, the leadership makes no substantive changes.

Sorry for the vent, but you hit a nerve, and I think you're 1,000 percent correct. Thank you for a wonderful article.

RAY HEINEN, Columbia, Ill.