Minnesota Association of Townships

INFORMATION LIBRARY

Grassroots Government

Township Options for Meeting Remotely

Minnesota's Emergency Executive Order to "Stay at Home" requires township governing bodies to make alternative meeting plans during COVID-19 public health emergency and still comply with the open meetings law. **Townships can conduct meetings via telephone conference calls** if the public is provided with an effective way to monitor such calls, such as public distribution of the teleconference number in the meeting posting. Posted notices should provide instructions for how the public may access the remote meeting, whether it is to be held via telephone conference call or video conference call. This includes providing the telephone number, video conference link, and any necessary passcodes or other login information.

MAT has assembled a non-exhaustive list of teleconference and video conference tools. We have not vetted the companies. Each of these tools likely comes with their strengths and weaknesses that you'll want to identify so you can determine what is the best option for your town. Townships will at least want to think about cost; bandwidth requirements; public accessibility to the tool; and whether or not you can mute participants entirely or individually.

I. Posting Notice for teleconferencing:

For all town board meetings, towns must post notice. The posted notice for meetings by teleconference, should include some statement of the Board's intent to hold the meeting by telephone conference. The following language could be used in your posted notice:

> "Due to the Peacetime Emergency declared by Governor Walz under Minnesota Statutes Chapter 12, the Health Pandemic that is COVID-19 as labeled by the Center for Disease Control, and the stay-home-order as declared by Minnesota Executive Order 20-20, the following meeting shall be conducted entirely through teleconferencing or other electronic means. If the public wishes to listen to and/or participate in the meeting the public should (*give appropriate means on how to access the meeting*)."

This addition to the notice will not only provide proper notice to residents about the location of the meeting, as the meeting will not be held in the regular meeting place, but it will also give a reason to the public on why the town board is unable to meet in the regular meeting place. This portion will also provide the public with the means to "attend" the meeting, so that the purpose of the open meeting law continues to be fulfilled.

The town board may publish this notice as well, so that the notice may be seen by other members of the public that do not regularly check the regular posting place, or those who do not believe it to be prudent to check the regular posting place during the stay-at-home order.

II. Procedure to Hold a meeting by telephone or electronic means
To hold a town board meeting by teleconference, the board may follow these steps:

1. Town board chairperson decides it is imprudent or unsafe to hold an in-person meeting because of heath pandemic or emergency declaration. These circumstances have been met by the Governor's Declaration of Peacetime Emergency, and separately by the Centers for Disease Control labelling COVID-19 a health pandemic.
2. Chairperson or other person contacts other supervisors to arrange for the date and time of the teleconference. It does not violate the Open Meeting Law to schedule the meeting.
3. A town officer acquires a teleconferencing number and entrance code from a teleconferencing services provider. The services listed in this document may be used, but other reputable providers can be found.
4. Post notice of the meeting: the notice must include the date, time, and telephone number and entrance code (if any), for the meeting. If this is a special board meeting, the notice must also list the items the board will consider. Anyone may post notice of the meeting. It is acceptable for a person to leave his or her home to post notice of the meeting under the stay at home order.
5. Optional Publishing or Posting: The board may publish or post extra notices of the meeting at their discretion.
6. Public Packet: If possible, the information that the board members will have during the meeting should be made available to the public, called the "Public Packet." The Public Packet could be posted for download on a website or shared cloud storage. Townships unable or aware of how to use those methods will need to decide on some other way to provide the Public Packet to those who request it.
7. Start the Meeting: At the appointed time, the board members join the conference.
8. Ensure each supervisor present can be heard. A call-and-response or roll call for each supervisor should be used.
9. Call for Quiet / Mute: The chairperson should remind the public that they are allowed to hear the meeting, but are expected to remain quiet during the board's business. If the township intends to allow public comment, it should explain when public comment will be allowed and how it will be administered during the teleconference. If possible, a town officer should make use of the online call management features available on most teleconferencing applications. Such features allow the officer to mute or unmute those on the call who are disruptive, whether intentionally or inadvertently.
10. Pass the Recognition of Telephone Meeting: The town board should pass a resolution recognizing their use of the teleconference power in the Open Meeting Law. MAT has provided a sample Resolution, found here: https://mntownships.org/download/5517/ . This resolution may be passed during the teleconference.
11. All votes by Roll Call: All votes must be conducted and recorded by roll call, so each supervisor's vote can be indicated individually.
12. Optional Audio Recording: Some teleconferencing applications include optional audio recording of the call. Township boards may choose to audio record the meeting. Townships do not need permission from any individual to record the call. If the call is recorded, it must be kept pursuant to the data retention schedule.

III.   Conference Call Helpful Hints

Teleconferencing presents technological and managerial challenges, especially as the number of participants on the call increases. The following hints may help your teleconference succeed.

- Test the technology ahead of time to ensure that all systems are working by the time your meeting is scheduled to start.

- When conducting a videoconference or internet-based meeting, the township should consider providing the public with an alternative telephone dial-in option for observing such a meeting so that lack of internet access is not a barrier to observing the meeting.
- At the beginning of each meeting conducted remotely, the chair of the governmental body should encourage all body members to identify themselves before they begin speaking and not to speak over one another. This will help all those listening to the meeting better understand who is speaking.
- Remember Minn. Stat. 13D.021, subd. 1(5) requires all votes on motions or resolution must be conducted through roll call. So, when voting, each board member must state their name and how they vote.
- When possible, a governmental body may wish to consider recording the meeting and posting it on its website as soon as practicable after the meeting concludes.
- The chair of the meeting will need a method to mute and unmute (usually included in the software user controls) people so that you won't be interrupted during agenda items that aren't open to public comment. Remember, the public does not have to be allowed to comment and you can mute them for the duration of the meeting.
- Remote meetings with multiple participants can be tricky so be sure to communicate meeting participation rules and strictly enforce them.

IV.   Conference Call Options:
- Telephone conferencing services include: freeconferencecall.com and freeconference.com and Google Hangouts.
- Fee-based phone conferencing services include join.me and UberConference.
- Web-Based Video Conferencing Options: 1. Zoom 2. Skype 3. Skype for Business 4. Google Hangouts Meet 5. GoToMeeting

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Easy Phone Calls:

https://www.freeconferencecall.com   Questions? Support Center
Video Tutorial

Benefits: No cost to use. Toll free option for small cost.
Limitations: Phone only – no computer/visual use.

Set up instructions:
1. One person needs to make a Host account online. Enter your email and choose a password, then click "create my free account".
2. You will receive a confirmation email. There are the details of your conference call dial-in number, access code, host PIN and instructions.

To host an audio conference call:
-Notify participants of the date and time of the conference call and provide the dial-in number and access code.
-Dial the dial-in number.
-When prompted, enter the access code, followed by pound (#).
-Press star (*) to enter the host PIN, followed by pound (#).

To join as a participant:
-Dial the dial-in number.
-When prompted, enter the access code, followed by pound (#).

To control who is heard in the conference:
The host can press ***5** to mute all participants. Participants can mute/unmute themselves by pressing ***6**. If the host presses ***5** a second time, it will mute everyone again, and pressing ***5** a third time returns to open conversation.

To record the audio (Free with this service):
For the host to start recording, press ***9** and then press **1** to confirm. To stop and save the recording, press ***9** again and **1** to confirm.
The recording will be online at https://www.freeconferencecall.com/profile/history, where you can listen to it or download it. To listen to the recording via phone, call (978) 990-5099. When prompted, enter your Host's access code, followed by pound (#). Press pound (#) again and the most recent recording will play.

FOR TOLL-FREE PARTICIPATION: The Host must upgrade and pay $0.02 per minute used. It will give your participants an (800) toll-free dial-in conference number to ensure they won't incur any long-distance charges.

-From your online profile https://www.freeconferencecall.com/profile/, click the small orange text that says "Buy toll-free". A pop-up will have a green button to "Add to Cart", which you should click. It will take you to another page.

-Enter your billing information, click the 'I'm not a robot' box, and click the box to 'agree to terms and conditions'. Click the orange "CONFIRM" button.

-You will receive information with the (800) toll-free number to use, and the billing will be charged at the end of the month for the minutes you've used.

-For an example of one meeting, a toll-free call for 8 participants, about 60 minutes long, at 2 cents per minute would cost the host about $10.00 total.

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Easy Phone Calls:

✳ FreeConference.com

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https://www.freeconference.com/   Questions? Support Center

Instructions for use:
One person needs to make a Host account online. Click the orange "Sign up free" button. Enter your name, your email and choose a password, check the box "I have read the terms and conditions", then click "create account". Or, log in using your Facebook account.

From online, at https://hello.freeconference.com/conf/conferences/create, click the blue words "Dial-in Information". A pop-up will tell you your dial-in number, access code, and host PIN.

To host an audio conference call:
-Notify participants of the date and time of the conference call and provide the dial-in number and access code.
-Dial the dial-in number.
-Enter the host PIN, followed by pound (#).
-Say your name, followed by pound (#).

To join as a participant:
-Dial the dial-in number.
-When prompted, enter the access code, followed by pound (#).
-Say your name, followed by pound (#).

To control who is heard in the conference:
Participants can mute/unmute themselves by pressing ***6**.

FOR TOLL-FREE PARTICIPATION, RECORDING, and more: The Host must upgrade to pay at least $9.99 per month. It will give your participants an (800) toll-free dial-in conference number to ensure they won't incur any long-distance charges. You will also be able to make and access recordings.
-From your online profile, click the small orange text or button that says "Upgrade". It will take you to another page.
-Select the package you want.
-Enter your billing information. Click the blue "Pay" button.
-You will receive the (800) toll-free number to use.
-This toll-free service upgrade gives a limited number of 'premium minutes.' For the $24.99/month subscription, for an example of one meeting, a toll-free call for 8 participants, about 60 minutes long would be included. Each additional meeting would cost the host $0.08 per minute used, per participant.

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Easy Video Calls:

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http://zoom.us   Questions? Resources and Help Center

Video Tutorial

Benefits: Video calls or audio calls. Free account for 40-minute limit, or upgrade for a small fee for longer. 100 people can join.
Limitations: This is primarily used for computer audio and visual.

Instructions to create an account:
All participants need to create an account online at https://zoom.us/signup. You can enter an email address. Go to your emails to find the Zoom confirmation email, and click the button or link to activate your account. You will create a username and password. You can also use a Google account or Facebook account to log in.

To download the necessary software:
From your profile, in the top right corner there is blue text "Host a Meeting". A drop-down list will appear and you can click "With Video On".
Click the blue text in the center of the page that says "Download and Run Zoom".
Find the download called "zoomusLauncher.zip". It will be on your internet browser, or in your computer's Downloads file. Double click the .zip folder and wait a moment.
Double click the blue icon "zoomus Launcher" to install. If there is a pop-up, click "Open" or "Allow". This is the software program, the desktop application to help with your video calls. "zoom.us" is now installed on your computer.

To host a meeting:
Go to MEETINGS, on the left side of the page, from your online profile.
Select SCHEDULE A MEETING.
Set your meeting up like this:
Pick a title.
Add a description.
Set the time and date.
Set the time zone.
Leave the duration at 1 hour (or adjust, it won't matter).

Registration – uncheck
Meeting Password – uncheck
Video Host and Participant – ON
Audio – BOTH
Enable Join Before Host – up to you. Do you want families to be in there before you? Either way.
Mute Participants Upon Entry – YES, it helps with the chaos
Enable Waiting Room – I would keep off
Only Authenticated Users Can Join – I think it's OK unchecked
Record the Meeting Automatically – ON THE HOST COMPUTER is what I would check because then it saves the file to your computer.

Save. It will pull you into the launch pad for the meeting.

The URL for the meeting is that blue line at the very bottom. Send that to your participants as soon as you schedule your meeting. (You can do it days and even weeks before).
If it's time RIGHT NOW to have your meeting, you just push START THIS MEETING.
If you scheduled your meeting prior, you will go to your MEETINGS tab from your dashboard and they will be listed there. You would click the blue meeting topic to launch to the screen above. Whew.

OK so say you are ready to have your meeting. You push the START THIS MEETING button and your meeting will start.

You will be prompted with two options – YES OPEN IN ZOOM and Connect With Computer Audio. And you are in. As soon as you open up the meeting, anyone with the link can join, so I would arrive early to get anything set up you may want.

Right off I would set YOUR dashboard to show the participant list and chat box. As the administrator of the meeting it will be helpful for you to see both. There is a black bar at the bottom of your page that will extend up and down as you hover over it.

Click Participant and Chat and the boxes will appear.
OK now a TOUR of the different options:

Mute & Video – These two are located in the bottom black bar. They allow you to shut off and turn on your sound and video. If you shut off your video, you profile picture will default.

Invite – Say you need to get someone the link while you are in your meeting, click the invite and COPY URL. You can then send it to them. (Trick – the numbers at the end of the URL are the meeting number).

Participants – This box will show you who is in your meeting. You can MUTE ALL, UNMUTE ALL, and there are a few other group options at the bottom of this box (take a peek). Each individual too you can control the video and audio of those people so it's a helpful box to have open.

To end your meeting, you just select END MEETING in the bottom right hand corner. Because you set it up to save to your device, it will start the saving process for you.

Free video calls are limited to 40-minute calls, for up to three participants. To upgrade: Go to https://zoom.us/pricing to view plans.