

# MASSPIRG

TO: Chairman Cabral, Chairman Collins and members of the Joint Committee on State Administration and Regulatory Oversight

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**In support of An Act to modernize participation in public meetings, H3040 & S2024 filed by Rep. Denise Garlick & Sen. Jason Lewis**

## **It's time to update our open meeting law**

Since early 2020, the Legislature has suspended provisions of the Open Meeting Law to enable public bodies to carry out their responsibilities remotely, with virtual access and participation by members of the public. As good government practices have evolved, many public bodies have combined the best of old and new, enabling both inperson and remote attendance.

When this temporary suspension expires we should not regress to in-person meetings only. Nor should we switch exclusively to virtual meetings. It's time for permanent reform that embraces hybrid meeting practices, expanding transparency and participation for the public and officials alike.

An Act to Modernize Participation in Public Meetings will ensure greater access to open meetings for everyone — particularly for people with disabilities, caregiving responsibilities, and limited transportation — by allowing officials and members of the public to attend meetings in person or remotely.

Government participation and transparency is the cornerstone to a strong democracy. This bill provides for both, making government meetings more accessible and transparent. The purpose of the Open Meeting Law is to ensure transparency in the deliberations on which public policy is based and give the public an opportunity for input. The democratic process depends on the public participating and having knowledge about the considerations underlying governmental action that affect them, their families, and communities.

Specifically, the bill gives municipalities more than five years to achieve this goal and creates a trust fund to help them finance it.

**Hybrid access and participation should be the new normal**

In many communities across the state, remote and hybrid meetings significantly increased public participation in local government.

- Remote access removes long-standing barriers to participation for residents with disabilities, seniors, people with limited access to transportation, and people with work and family obligations that prevent them from getting to and spending hours at municipal buildings.
- Access to public meetings should never again hinge on a person's physical mobility, or their ability to afford a car, get time off work, or find a care provider.
- At the same time, it's a proud Massachusetts tradition for people to gather in community to make important community decisions.
- We can enrich our democratic process, ensure access for all, and increase public participation by blending remote and in-person meetings.

### **Feasible, affordable and financed**

An Act to Modernize Participation in Public Meetings will:

- Phase in hybrid meetings, prioritizing state agencies and elected municipal bodies
- Require universal compliance by 2030
- Allow municipalities to seek economic hardship waivers for non-elected bodies unable to provide hybrid meetings
- Create a Municipal Hybrid Meeting Trust Fund to administer a grant program that will help municipalities finance their modernization efforts.

We urge you to give this bill a favorable report. We can't go backward. Let's keep the door open for everyone who wants to participate in their government.