

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: NOVEMBER 19, 2020

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR & MEMBERS OF THE CITY COUNCIL

FROM: VICE MAYOR ELIZABETH BENNETT-PARKER

SUBJECT: EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PUBLIC COMMENT

Our Principles for Civic Engagement state that Alexandria encourages the participation of all members of the community in dialogue and decision-making processes. The principle of easy participation concludes with “participants will have the flexibility to participate in a variety of ways, including online and in person.”

While residents can watch our meetings on channel 70, stream our meetings online, and access recordings afterwards, they did not have a way to truly participate online until we moved our meetings to Zoom in response to COVID-19. This memo seeks to build upon this experience and sustain it once we return to in-person meetings, recognizing that requiring in-person attendance creates barriers to participation.

[§2.2-3708.2](#) of the Code of Virginia restricts our ability, along with that of all our residents who serve on boards and commissions, to participate electronically during our respective meetings. However, it concludes with “nothing in this section shall be construed to prohibit the use of interactive audio or video means to expand public participation.” Our ability to expand options for public comment via the use of video and audio means is thus a question of policy and resources.

With the agreement of my colleagues, I would like to ask staff to return to Council with information regarding what resources would be needed to expand our ability to receive public comment at Council meetings in the following ways:

- Submission of video or audio files sent directly via email or through a link to YouTube or a cloud service such as Dropbox, to a designated email address;
- Calling a telephone number established for this purpose and leaving a message; and
- Providing live remote comments via Zoom, Skype, or similar platform once we return to in-person meetings and are no longer in a state of emergency.

This information should also include what additional resources would be required to translate such comments into English if necessary.

While this initiative, if ultimately approved, would start with Council, it would be my hope that it could be expanded to the Planning Commission and other Boards and Commissions that receive public comment.

cc: Mark Jinks, City Manager
Laura Triggs, Deputy City Manager
Vanetta Pledger, Chief Information Officer and Director of IT Services
Gloria Sitton, City Clerk and Clerk of Council
Joanna Anderson, City Attorney