Your Right to Know / Bill Lueders

Public bodies find new ways to meet

Believe it or not, this has been a relatively quiet time on the open government front.

In my role with the Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council, I often field calls from reporters and citizens regarding the problems they are experiencing getting access to public meetings and records.

In recent weeks, those calls are down, way down, from maybe two a day to one a week.

This is happening during a time of tremendous upheaval in how meetings are being conducted in Wisconsin, now that they cannot take place in an actual group setting.

Literally thousands of state and local public bodies are having to implement new methods and embrace new technologies to allow their members and the public to attend meetings through their computers and phones. It’s a vast and transformative undertaking.

I suspect that this has not worked perfectly in any quarter, but I have heard complaints from none. That’s a good thing.

One Madison resident even [expressed](https://madison.com/wsj/opinion/letters/city-zoom-meeting-was-more-accessible----cathy-douglas/article_f4890ca8-d1c7-521f-879c-6295fba0cf9a.html) in a letter to the editor that it was actually easier to “attend” a meeting remotely via the video-conferencing app [Zoom](https://zoom.us/), which allows members of the public to register for or against specific proposals, and submit written and verbal comments.

At a time when the actions and inactions of government can literally be matters of life and death, government bodies are doing their level best to include the public — because they want the public’s attention and they need the public’s help.

My group’s [statement](http://wisfoic.org/wisconsin-foic-statement-on-public-meetings-and-the-coronavirus/) on open meetings in the age of COVID-19, issued on March 16, acknowledges the “important work being done by those who serve on public bodies across the state” and “applaud(s) their efforts to operate in as open and transparent a manner as possible.”

The state Department of Justice’s Office of Open Government has issued two sets of guidelines in recent weeks. The first, on March 16, [advises](https://www.doj.state.wi.us/sites/default/files/news-media/3_16_20_OOG%20Advisory_COVID-19_and_Open_Meetings.pdf) public bodies to continue providing notices of meetings, while conducting them via conference calls or remote access that the public can join in on. It also says public bodies may need to accommodate people for whom remote access is difficult.

In [additional guidance](https://www.doj.state.wi.us/news-releases/office-open-government-advisory-additional-information-regarding-covid-19-and-open) on March 20, the office said meeting notices should provide instructions for how the public can attend remotely, and that bodies conducting a videoconference or internet-based meeting should consider creating an alternative dial-in option “so that lack of internet access is not a barrier to observing the meeting.”

The office urged meeting chairs to remind speakers to identify themselves for the benefit of those listening and to not speak over each other. And it said public bodies should “consider recording the meeting and posting it (online) as soon as practicable after the meeting concludes.”

This is all good advice, and there’s no question government officials need all the guidance they can get.

But there’s something else public officials in Wisconsin deserve to hear at this time from the people they represent: thank you.

*Your Right to Know is a monthly column distributed by the Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council (*[*wisfoic.org*](http://wisfoic.org/)*), a group dedicated to open government. Bill Lueders, the editor of The Progressive, is the group’s president.*