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THE FUTURE OF WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW

Pandemic Forces Local Governments' Hands into Era of Virtual Public Meetings

Local governments have a legal obligation to keep conducting business and engaging the public during the global pandemic, but there can often be more to virtual public meetings than meets the eye.

JED PRESSGROVE, GOVERNMENT TECHNOLOGY | APRIL 8, 2020 | ANALYSIS

With social distancing being one of the keys to slowing down the COVID-19 outbreak, local governments face the fundamental question of what to do about

public meetings.

Some states, such as [Tennessee](#) and [Nebraska](#), had to issue executive orders to allow virtual public meetings to occur. Assuming a government body is authorized to hold a virtual public meeting, how should it be done?

“There’s no one right answer to this, and the best solution for your municipality or governing body is something that you’re already familiar with, if possible,” said Brian Platt, business administrator for Jersey City, N.J. “Don’t try to copy a city that you think did it right.”

According to an email received by *Government Technology*, Jersey City held its first fully virtual caucus meeting and city council meeting on March 23 and 25, respectively. The municipality upgraded and utilized Microsoft Teams, a tool the city’s been using on a day-to-day basis.

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Platt contrasted the simplicity of his city's approach with the "huge production" that was Miami's virtual commission meeting on March 25. According to a tweet from CIO Mike Sarasti, Miami's meeting involved tech from Zoom, Granicus, Qualtrics, Cisco and WeTransfer. Sarasti could not be reached for comment.

Louisville, Ky., had been using WebEx for virtual meetings before social distancing measures were put in place across the country. The city was in the middle of transitioning to a cloud version of the tool when COVID-19 struck, IT Director Chris Seidt said. The tech allows the city to continue holding its metro council, daily town hall and press briefing meetings.

Seidt said making sure people stay muted might be the single most important tip to keep in mind, which means that walking everyone through functionalities or sending tips and tricks beforehand is a must.

"When we tried to go off mute in the first press briefing meeting, we had about 20 people trying to go in at the same time and ask questions," Seidt said. "It didn't work very well."

Seidt also suggests starting virtual public meetings a few minutes late. Meetings tend to be scheduled right on the hour, so allowing about five minutes to pass is a good way to avoid technical issues that may result from numerous organizations using a digital platform at the same time.

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Testing is key to making sure things go off without hitches. Seidt said it's unwise to hold a meeting where people will be logging into a system for the first time. This is especially true for officials who may have problems joining the meeting from home.

“We’re having them run some speed tests at their house and send us a screenshot just to make sure they have a good experience,” Seidt said.

Keeping the public connected is another challenge. Platt said Jersey City will change how it handled citizen comments for its first virtual council meeting, where they asked individuals to sign up to speak via email or phone. During the actual meeting, Jersey City would manually and individually call each person

when it was their time to speak.

Unfortunately, not everyone answered their phone when they were supposed to.

“That was a little slower than we would have liked,” Platt said.

To remedy this limitation, Jersey City is experimenting with a method that would allow citizens to call in and be placed in a virtual waiting room.

Seidt said pumping content to residents through social media connectors is a great idea. Louisville has moderators collect questions on a Facebook Live feed and put them in the WebEx chat so that the mayor or whomever can address the concerns during the meeting.

“We’ve seen four or five hundred residents on real-time with Facebook,” Seidt said. He later added, “You want to put it on as many platforms as you can.”

Seidt added that Louisville worked with the metro TV channel to set up a picture-in-picture overlay so that citizens can see the meeting video with a sign language interpreter.

Security also cannot be overlooked. During a virtual public meeting in Kalamazoo, Mich., Internet trolls [disrupted](#) the proceedings with profanity and racial slurs.

“Making sure you have a secure platform with a password for the meeting is really critical,” Seidt said.

Government Technology is a sister site to Governing. Both are divisions of e.Republic.

Jed Pressgrove Staff Writer

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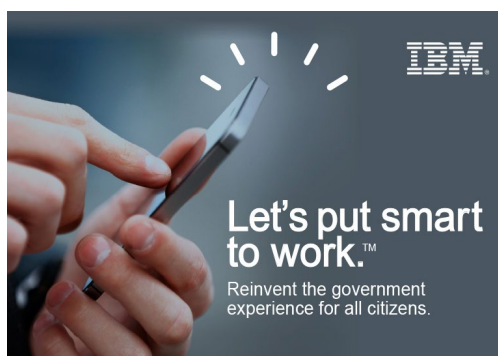


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