



PUBLIC MEETINGS WITH ZOOM

Implementation Experience in the State of Rhode Island

Abstract

Zoom is a well-tested business collaboration tool, but can it work for public government meetings with a mix of attendee type and participation methods?

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On Thursday, March 19, 2020 at 7:00 p.m. the City of Providence, Rhode Island hosted its first Regular City Council Meeting attended remotely via digital means. The platform utilized was Zoom. It was deemed a success, but there are opportunities for improvement.

Zoom has been an effective collaboration tool for businesses for years, primarily tailored towards users who create a Zoom account (but also allowing calling in by phone) so they may communicate remotely.

Public bodies have a relatively unique requirement compared to other users of Zoom, related to the muting of certain participants. Citizens are often not entitled to speak whenever they like during public meetings (and may not be entitled to participate at all), in contrast with a business setting.

Main reasons an initial decision was made to go with Zoom

- It costs \$14.99/month for a Pro account (a little less if you pay for a year up front)
- It allows up to 100 participants at that price level (with an upgrade if necessary)
- It allows recording and saves both an audio file and a video file (of participants speaking) on the host computer or in the Zoom cloud for later replay or download
- It allows muting of all participants with the ability to prevent self-unmuting
- It allows attendance via web-enabled mobile devices (Providence may do this in the future, but encouraged participants to join via dial-in by phone for our first meeting)

Main challenge needed to work out ahead of the meeting

- All participants can be muted by the host using the Zoom administrative dialog, but of course voting members (in this case the City Council) must be able to speak. Voting members were asked to join 15 minutes early. Because they were not being asked to use a Zoom account, but instead to dial in with a regular phone, the Zoom platform could only display the phone number they were calling in from (not their name). **So in advance of the meeting, the host needed to make a list of the phone numbers of all voters and then during the 15 minute call in time, the host searched for each council member's phone number in the participant list as they dialed in, and unmuted them manually before the meeting was called to order.**

Thoughts we had for the future before our initial meeting

- We hoped (and still do) that Council Members would each create Zoom accounts and become familiar with the platform. When a user is logged in and joins a meeting, they can utilize a "raise hand" function that indicates the user wishes to speak. This functionality would allow the host to initially mute all members except for the chair, and then to only unmute a user when they virtually "raise their hand" and the chair (in this case, the Council President) recognizes them to speak, consistent with Parliamentary Procedure. This could alleviate the challenge highlighted above associated with identifying members, because when a user joins a meeting with a Zoom account, their name can be automatically display on a box that represents them.

The City Council and City Clerk staff determined that our initial use of the platform should remain as low-tech as possible, to flatten the learning curve (no pun intended).

Participants were only provided with a dial-in number and pin for our first meeting (although if they had Zoom accounts, they were not prohibited from using them). Two methods were used to join:

- 1) Dial-in using a phone number and a pin
- 2) Zoom app via web enabled device, using the same pin

Joining via phone by simple dial-in:

Pros:

- Low Tech (just dial number, then pin#, then # to join conference)
- Participants that have been unmuted by the host can use their own phone's mute button to avoid background noise interference when not speaking, and easily unmute themselves to speak

Cons:

- Cannot see other participants, nor can they see you
- Host cannot determine identity of callers except by phone number

Joining via Zoom, requires creating account and joining via web-enabled mobile device (smart phone, tablet, desktop/laptop):

Pros:

- Participants can easily identify each other (their Zoom profile name is displayed in a box)
- Participants are visible if their webcam is turned on (not required) and they can see host
- Easy identification of anyone speaking (participant box lights up when sound is detected)
- "Raise Hand" function allows participants to notify host they wish to speak

Con: Muting is a little complicated. Keep in mind participants (the public) not permitted to speak may attend the meeting only as an audience. The host must employ the MUTE ALL function as soon as the meeting is started (*including an option preventing self-unmuting*), and then must manually unmute the voting members (City Council) one at a time. The Providence City Clerk discovered a complication ***if someone using the Zoom app mutes themselves*** (out of courtesy). A self-muted user is treated equally by the Zoom application as other muted participants so *they cannot re-unmute themselves*. **During Providence's first meeting, a council member using the Zoom app displayed courteous behavior that is common for conference call attendees, and muted themselves when not speaking. When the City Clerk called on them, the participant could not un-mute themselves. The Clerk had to locate that member on the host display and click unmute again so the voter could speak. This happened a few times because the user kept muting themselves, until the complication was understood. It would be nice if Zoom could identify/remember for the duration of a meeting who the host had intentionally unmuted, and allow those participants to mute and unmute themselves at will, but it doesn't appear Zoom is that sophisticated yet.**

Extra logistics and advice after the first meeting:

- The host used a laptop computer. When starting a meeting, Zoom asks users joining via computer if they would like to use the audio (microphone) from their computer or instead dial in via a phone (a pop-up dialog displays dial-in information). We used a normal phone on speaker phone for better audio quality.
- We placed our digital audio recorder right next to the speakerphone to record the meeting. The Zoom recording feature was used as well (as backup) and recording was started once the meeting started. Zoom allows the host to save a recording to their computer (it processes the file after the meeting ends) or in the cloud (although there is a limited amount of space allowed for the Pro account).
- In Providence’s case, the entire 15 minute “early call-in period” was necessary to identify and unmute council members manually before the meeting was called to order. This is important. A test call was also conducted earlier in the day with council members that were available. Crucial lessons were learned during both periods. Practice makes perfect.
- Some council members and constituents may not be tech-savvy. We did not expect participants to download a Zoom app or log on to their computer. They were simply sent an e-mail that said this:

Please dial in at 6:45 p.m. this evening.

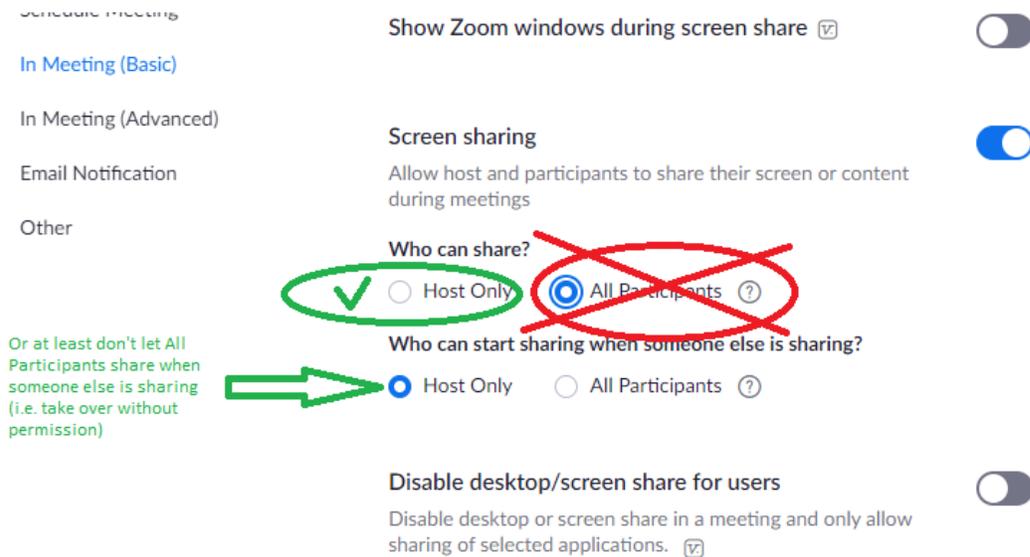
Please dial: +16465588656

Pin: 692739810#

Press # again to enter the conference waiting room.

- This information was also texted to the council members.
- This might seem like too much detail, but the automatically generated invitation from Zoom provides a convenient dial-in number that is in this format: +16465588656,,692739810# If a message with that format is displayed on most smart phones, it can be clicked and the phone will dial the number and pin automatically. But this was confusing to some who had never seen this “shortcut” before. So the simpler, more familiar format shown above was sent. The auto-generated invitation also includes the weblink: <https://zoom.us/j/692739810> which we omitted from our invitation as well. Maybe in the future people will be more familiar with these options and we can include them, but we decided to instead move forward with technology in the smallest increments possible.

- Finally, all hosts should review the Zoom account settings thoroughly. There are many pages of options. Each host will likely want to adjust them. For example, Providence turned off the “ding” that is audible when each person joins a meeting to reduce potential annoyance. You may also want to turn off chat ability, etc. and especially the ability for attendees to present at will so that you can avoid [Zoombombing](#) (shout out to Molly Fitzpatrick in Block Island for this warning). See figure below:



Additional considerations based on communication with Clerks around Rhode Island:

- Challenge of hybrid attendance methods (in person and remote simultaneously):** It is much easier to capture, record and hear audio if all participants are remote because their voices are clearly picked up on their phone or mobile device. Having your Council meet in person makes it challenging to hear all voices unless the room is equipped with sophisticated microphones and audio equipment that can collect the audio from the voices of each Council member and feed it into your host’s device. It is the same problem that people often have with a traditional conference call. It is difficult to hear people from across the room. For this reason, hybrid meetings, whether all voting members are in their usual meeting place and the public is dialing in as an audience, or whether some voting members are in the normal meeting place and others are dialing in, make using Zoom more complicated.

- **Include remote attending instructions on your agenda:** Don't forget to schedule meetings 48 hours in advance and include instructions for joining on meeting agendas before posting them to the Secretary of State in order to comply with Open Meeting Laws. On March 24, 2020, Providence posted its first agenda on its [open meetings portal](#) and on the [Secretary of State website](#) including remote participation instructions (instead of a physical location of the meeting). Here is the header of that agenda:



Board of Investment Commissioners
Regular Meeting

~ Agenda ~

Thursday, March 26, 2020

3:30 PM

Conference Remote Meeting

Dial in at +16465588656 with Pin: 682952068# or via Zoom at <https://zoom.us/j/682952068>

I. INVESTMENT PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS

- **Reading full text of agenda items and Roll Call votes:** In Providence City Council meetings, it is common for the Majority Leader to make a motion that goes something like this: "I move to suspend the rules and waive the reading of Items 4-6 and pass the several items on a roll call vote." This type of motion does away with the formal reading of the entire text of an item, and speeds up the meeting. It was decided to avoid such motions during remote meetings to increase transparency and the ease with which the public and council members can follow what is being voted on. During our first meeting, all items were fully read into the record so there was no confusion about what item we were voting on. Furthermore, all votes were roll call votes so that the City Clerk could audibly record each vote accurately (Providence normally has many votes that are simply voice votes).
- **Challenges of a voting member joining a meeting late:** If a member of a body joins by phone in the middle of a meeting, some alternative method would have to be used to notify the host to unmute them. Perhaps they could send the host (or an assistant of the host) a text message or an e-mail. For Providence's first remote meeting, all council members attended so this was not an issue, but it certainly will be in the future.
- **Cloud versus local storage:** The first meeting Providence hosted lasted about 21 minutes. The host chose to save the recording to the local (City Clerk) desktop. Zoom saves both an audio only file and a video file with audio. The audio-only file was about 9 megabytes. The video file was 37 megabytes. By that calculation, about 30 megabytes would be required to save each hour of audio-only and about 100 megabytes per hour of video (showing the images of attendees visible on the Zoom app). The Pro account comes with 1 gigabyte of cloud storage included if you want to record into the Zoom cloud and let them host your files. Recording to the cloud provides the option for downloading those files to your computer and (with a more expensive business-level account) provides the option for automated digital transcription. But you may also record the file to the host's computer and upload them to YouTube or another hosting platform (or you can upgrade for an extra \$40/month to have 100 gigabytes of Zoom cloud storage).

- **Executive Sessions:** Some remote meeting platforms may provide a feature (with a paid upgrade) for certain participants to leave to a different “room” for an executive session. Alternatively, a host could schedule two different meetings, one public and one private, and the members of the body would have to leave the first and join the second private line, and then return when executive session is complete. It is recommended that both sessions be recorded (taking care to not record/upload the executive session to a publicly accessible site. An alternative teleconference platform may be utilized for executive sessions, while using Zoom for regular sessions, the Zoom “Rooms” function could be used with an upgrade. *A simpler, yet effective option (shout out to Evan Lemoine) for those using Zoom Pro is to utilize the Waiting Room function.* This allows the host to admit participants as desired at the beginning of the meeting, but also allows the host to place participants back into the waiting room temporarily during the executive session. Two options would work for recording in this case:
 - Either the Zoom recording could be paused while another recording device is used to capture the Executive Session recording, then resume Zoom recording after the Executive Session is completed and all participants are re-admitted OR
 - Multiple recordings could be created and then stitched together
 - Zoom recording could be started/stopped for first part of regular session
 - Zoom recording could be started/stopped for executive session
 - Zoom recording could be started/stopped for second part of regular session
 - First and second parts of regular sessions would need to be stitched together using an audio file tool

- **Following Robert’s Rules** with more formality becomes increasingly important. Chairs and of committees are going to have to sharpen their attentiveness. Members (and anyone in a public meeting for that matter) should not speak until called on by the chair, who also identifies them verbally before they speak. In person it is easy to get away with a hand-raise and a nod, but understanding who is speaking becomes increasingly important when we are not in person.

- **Swearing-In or Oath Taking:** Some meetings may require a member to be sworn in or to take an oath during the meeting for a variety of reasons. This seems feasible if a webcam can be utilized so that the member taking the oath is visible while speaking.

- **Public Comment:** Upholding a citizen’s right to speak at a public meeting, where applicable will require varying levels of preparation. For any public meeting that provides this right, the process should be documented in writing and included on the published agenda, ideally at the beginning before any of the agenda items appear. Topics to consider when producing this process include, but are not limited to:
 - By what methods should a citizen who wishes to speak notify the host?
 - How will the host recognize/confirm a citizen’s desire to speak?
 - If a citizen joins a meeting in the middle of the public speaking segment (as opposed to in advance), is there an alternative process?

- **Clarify Display Names:** Depending on what platform you are using, when a participation joins your meeting, they may have a generic display name, such as “iPhone8.” You may want to ask participants to change this to their real name, or manually change it as they join when you determine who each participant is.

Highlights of logistical considerations for hosts scheduling public meetings (platform-agnostic)

Important Basics

1. Determine what platform will be used
2. Determine what options participants will have to join (web, app, phone, etc.)
3. Schedule meetings in advance using your platform and include participation information on your public agenda, describing how to join the meeting, based on the options allowed in point #2.
4. Will you enter into executive session? What will be the logistics for this?
5. Determine how your meeting will be recorded (audio and/or video)
6. Determine how the host will identify participants
7. Determine how participants will be muted and unmuted as needed throughout the meeting
8. Determine where the host (and his/her team, if applicable) will physically be located
9. **Test all of the above before doing it live!**

Gotcha topics that you need to be aware of

- Make sure for point #3 above you include all of the necessary details
 - Some participation platforms allow you to join via a web-enabled device.
 - Some participation platforms only require a phone number.
 - Sometimes a pin is required in addition to the phone number.
 - Sometimes a password is required in addition to a pin and phone number.
- PLEASE **review all settings in your platform** before initiating your first public meeting. Important settings include:
 - Whether a sound will be heard each time someone joins or leaves (this can be annoying)
 - Whether chats are available
 - Whether participants can share their screens (this should be disallowed for guests/observers)
- Make sure guests are not prevented from recording the meeting themselves (some platforms allow the host to control this, but Open Meetings Laws do not allow any restrictions)

Helpful Hosting Tips

- Use a large monitor to manage participants if possible
- If your platform allows, rename participants as they join so you can easily identify them during the meeting
- Ask the chair/members of a body to read the full text of agenda items so it is clear what matter is before the body
- Avoid voice votes, as Roll Call votes makes it clear who is voting how
- Ask all speakers to announce their names before speaking
- Ask the chair to speak the mover and seconder of each motion before calling for discussion/vote for clarification, consistent with Parliamentary Procedure