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LOCAL

Lots of people tuned in to public meetings on Zoom. That may be coming to an end

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Paramus school board meetings used to attract just a handful of regulars. Then came the pandemic.

With new virtual options like Zoom in place, participation at the meetings exploded. Sessions that once barely filled a room instead maxed out the 500-person Zoom capacity.

"It's been wonderful in that regard, being able to give the public the ability to ask questions, voice concerns and give their input to issues affecting their kids," said Superintendent Sean Adams.

That scenario was mirrored in many towns during the pandemic. Meetings that had been sparsely attended in person saw a surge in online attendance and engagement. It was true for school board meetings, planning board hearings and council sessions.

'Zoom bombings' and tech issues: Towns are hoping for quick return to in-person meetings

Now, as towns begin to bring back in-person meetings, they are at a crossroads. How do they maintain this increased level of participation from the public? And how important is it to accommodate parents, seniors and others who face barriers to in-person attendance?

While some towns are looking into the possibility of introducing hybrid meetings, where people could participate both virtually and in person, others will return to the status quo.

The League of Municipalities has heard from many towns about an increase in participation thanks to remote options and foresees some hybrid meetings.

“It is easier to hop on your phone or hop on Zoom to hear the public meeting than it is to get somewhere in person,” said Frank Marshall, associate general counsel for the League of Municipalities. “Child care, and for a myriad of other reasons, makes it difficult to go in person.”

Laura Zurfluh, a board member for the Good Government Coalition of New Jersey, said her organization believes hybrid meetings going forward are the best option for towns. Residents could miss out on things if meetings remained solely virtual. It’s easier for public officials to mute someone's microphone than silence them in person, for instance. .

"I think you lose some things when you have just virtual meetings, but you do gain accessibility for those who can't or aren't willing to go out to the actual meeting," Zurfluh said.

Comfy clothes, flexible schedules: What we'll miss when the world goes back to normal Palisades Park is returning to fully in-person meetings with social distancing, but Borough Administrator David Lorenzo said he believes all the meetings should be remote.

"I thought it was a better way of communicating to more people," Lorenzo said. "In today's society, with people working two jobs, they may not be around. Whatever the case may be, as long as you have access to an internet connection, you can listen or participate in the meeting. I'd like to see that be the norm."

Adams said the Paramus school board is discussing how to retain the increased participation after COVID is no longer an issue. If it ends up being a hybrid of virtual and in-person meetings, the board must ensure it's done in a way that is accessible to everyone, he said.

"We still have to make sure technologically that the platform is accessible to all," Adams said. "If you are just streaming live on YouTube with no ability for the person viewing remotely to ask a question where the same person, in person, could ask a question, they might have to submit a question via email. Now you're adding another layer. They might not have accessibility to email or may not know how."

Fort Lee Mayor Mark Sokolich considered Zoom and Google Meet phenomenal tools that got involvement by people who wouldn't otherwise be involved, but did stress the importance of in-person meetings. Going forward, he imagines committee meetings or town hall meetings that could be held virtually.

"I can't tell you how many meetings we had where I would look at my council and say, 'If this was face to face, nobody from the public would show up, or two or three people would show up,' " Sokolich said.

Nightmare come true: Hackensack school trustee resigns after airing bathroom break on Zoom

The Tenafly school district is already doing hybrid meetings and plans to continue. During public comment, residents who are called to speak alternate between in-person participants and those on a Zoom call.

"We have livestreamed our meetings for more than a decade on Channel 77 for viewing the meeting, but the remote access allows for more public participation of those not in physical attendance," said Christine Corliss, the district's communication's manager. "People seemed to like that, so I think we're going to keep it as of right now."

Zoning board meetings were some of the meetings that saw some of the most participation in Oradell, said Mayor Dianne Didio. "That drew a lot of people that wouldn't otherwise be able to attend a meeting," she said. The borough is still weighing options.

For other towns, going back to fully in-person meetings made sense.

The Paramus Borough Council had a call-in option during the pandemic for meetings. Mayor Richard LaBarbiera has decided to discontinue that, because while officials found some good, there were some negatives, including people not being able to hear well and misbehavior by participants.

"We thought it would be best to go back to full in-person meetings and take that option off the table," LaBarbiera said. "How many meetings were there where people were not respecting the ground rules? It was like Comedy Central."

Stephanie Noda is a local reporter for NorthJersey.com. For unlimited access to the most important news from your local community, please subscribe or activate your digital account today.

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