

## **Town Options for Meeting Remotely**

**Updated March 26, 2020**

The Safer at Home Order exempts town government as an essential function and allows each town to determine what of its own functions and services are essential. In short, your town boards, commissions, etc. can still meet while effectively practicing social distancing rules. That said, many towns have asked for flexibility regarding both regular meetings and upcoming special ones like the Annual Town Meeting and Board of Review.

WTA asked the Governor's office for the desired flexibility; however, he simply does not have the authority to use an Executive Order to do so. Consequently, WTA is now working with the legislature to attempt to accomplish flexibility for those of you that want to use it. There are currently two draft bills that would allow greater open meetings law flexibility, postponement of the annual town meeting, and postponement of the board of review. If signed into law, these would be options for your town.

**You would not have to use them.**

In the absence of an Executive Order and until any potential bills have become law, the [Office of Open Government](#) in the Wisconsin Department of Justice issued two advisories in March 2020 indicating that governmental bodies may meet remotely during the COVID-19 public health emergency and still comply with the open meetings law. The [March 16 advisory](#) states that "governmental bodies typically can meet their open meetings obligations, while practicing social distancing to help protect public health, by conducting meetings via telephone conference calls if the public is provided with an effective way to monitor such calls (such as public distribution at least 24 hours in advance of dial-in information for a conference call)." The [March 20 advisory](#) further explains that meeting "notices should provide instructions for how the public may access the remote meeting, whether it is to be held via telephone conference call or video conference call. This includes providing the telephone number, video conference link, and any necessary passcodes or other login information."

WTA has assembled a non-exhaustive list of teleconference and video conference tools for those towns that want to exercise this option. We have not vetted the companies, except that WTA uses Wisline for teleconferencing and has used Zoom and Go to Meeting for video conferencing. Each of these tools likely comes with their strengths and weaknesses that you'll want to identify so you can determine what is the best option for your town. Towns will at least want to think about cost; bandwidth requirements; public accessibility to the tool; whether or not you can mute participants entirely or individually; and, of course, all of the considerations as noted in the Attorney General's guidance.

### **Conference call Options:**

1. **Wisline Teleconference** offers telephone conferencing services to educational, governmental & non-profit groups. Local governments can establish an account that is exclusively for that community and use the system on a moment's notice 24/7 without reservation. Once your account is set up, the default is 75 phone lines but can be increased to as high as 150 lines. The rate is \$0.034 per connection/per minute. For more information send an email to: [wislineservices@ics.uwex.edu](mailto:wislineservices@ics.uwex.edu)

2. Free telephone conferencing services include: <https://www.freeconferencecall.com/> and [freeconference.com](https://www.freeconference.com) and [Google Hangouts](https://www.google.com/hangouts).
3. Fee-based phone conferencing services include [join.me](https://www.join.me) and [UberConference](https://www.uberconference.com).

### **Web-Based Video Conferencing Options:**

1. [Zoom](https://zoom.us)
2. [Skype](https://www.skype.com)
3. [Skype for Business](https://www.skype.com/business)
4. [Google Hangouts Meet](https://www.google.com/meet)
5. [GoToMeeting](https://www.gotomeeting.com)

### **More Helpful Hints**

- Test the technology ahead of time to ensure that all systems are working by the time your meeting is scheduled to start.
- When conducting a videoconference or internet-based meeting, the town should consider providing the public with an alternative telephone dial-in option for observing such a meeting so that lack of internet access is not a barrier to observing the meeting.
- At the beginning of each meeting conducted remotely, the chair of the governmental body should encourage all body members to identify themselves before they begin speaking and not to speak over one another. This will help all those listening to the meeting better understand who is speaking.
- When possible, a governmental body may wish to consider recording the meeting and posting it on its website as soon as practicable after the meeting concludes.
- The chair of the meeting will need a method to mute and unmute (usually included in the software user controls) people so that you won't be interrupted during agenda items that aren't open to public comment. Remember, in Wisconsin the public does not have to be allowed to comment and you can mute them for the duration of the meeting.
- Remote meetings with multiple participants can be tricky so be sure to communicate meeting participation rules and strictly enforce them.

### **Related Resources**

- [COVID-19: Ultimate Guide to Free Video Conferencing & Collaboration](#), UC Today, March 16, 2020
- [What It Takes to Run a Great Virtual Meeting](#), Harvard Business Review, March 5, 2020
- [Coronavirus prompts collaboration tool makers to offer wares for free](#), Computer World, March 18, 2020