



## Legislation Summary:

### An Act to modernize participation in public meetings

Initial bill number(s): H.3040/S.2024

Sponsors: Rep. Denise Garlick, Sen. Jason Lewis

### What the bill does, why LWVMA supports it, and the League position relative to this bill.

Since early 2020, the legislature has suspended provisions of the Open Meeting Law to enable public bodies to carry out their responsibilities remotely rather than in person, with virtual access and participation by members of the public. As good government practices have evolved, many public bodies have combined the best of old and new practices: enabling members of the public to attend meetings in person or remotely. These temporary rules have now been extended to March 31, 2025. With that extension, boards and committees in cities and towns continue to operate under emergency pandemic regulations allowing remote-only meetings. There is confusion about what is required and when. This bill needs to be enacted quickly to let municipalities know what to expect. It also needs to be enacted to assure remote access to meetings will continue.

This legislation will:

- Phase in hybrid meetings, first prioritizing state agencies and elected municipal bodies.
- Require universal compliance by 2030.
- In the meantime, allow municipalities to seek economic hardship waivers for non-elected bodies unable to provide hybrid meetings. The default provision for municipal bodies unable to provide hybrid meetings is first remote meetings, with in-person only as a last resort.
- Create a Municipal Hybrid Meeting Trust Fund to administer a grant program to help municipalities finance their modernization efforts.

Remote and hybrid meetings have significantly increased public participation in local government. These meeting formats opened doors to our democratic process by removing barriers that predated the pandemic.

- Remote access removes long-standing barriers to participation for residents with disabilities, seniors, people with limited access to transportation, and people with work and family obligations that prevent them from getting to and spending hours at municipal buildings.
- Access to public meetings should never again hinge on a person's physical mobility, or their ability to afford a car, get time off work, or find a care provider.

- At the same time, it's important for people to be able to gather in community to make important community decisions, therefore the bill proposes hybrid rather than remote-only meetings.
- We can enrich our democratic process, ensure access for all, and increase public participation by blending remote and in-person meetings.

The very first position statement in *Where We Stand* supports this bill:

*Promote an open governmental system that is representative, accountable and responsive; that has a fair and adequate fiscal basis; that protects individual liberties established by the constitution; and that assures opportunities for citizen participation in government decision-making.... (LWVUS)*

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