



## **Open Meetings still need to be open**

The coronavirus has changed the way we live, limiting travel, closing schools and businesses, forcing us to stay home to stay safe.

But the coronavirus could not stop the workings of government.

As taxpaying citizens, we still demand and expect police and fire protection from our local units of government. We still expect the roads to be plowed and repaired. We still expect the water to flow from the tap when we turn it on.

Our local governments are necessary. The things they are designed to do for us are essential.

In March 2020, when shutdowns became the norm, the problem became how to continue to let governments do their job under the restriction placed on all Michiganians under the state of emergency and state of disaster, both declared by the governor.

How do you hold a public meeting when gatherings are prohibited? How do you operate a public government without allowing the public in?

Executive Order 2020-15 was enacted on April 1, 2020 which allows local units of government to hold their public meetings electronically. They are restricted to following some guidelines. It has since been turned into law as of the end of last year.

PA 254 would allow for remote, virtual meeting under certain circumstances through December 31, 2021.

In addition to being allowed to meet, deliberate and vote on necessary and essential items on their agendas, any local unit of government can hold a meeting via Zoom or other easily accessible form of electronic video conference. They can also hold a meeting via teleconference. They can do either as long as they provide easy access by computer or phone to any constituent wanting to participate.

Governments have to provide information to their constituents on when the meeting is to be held, what is on the agenda, why it is critical to be debated and decided and how anyone can connect and participate.

Questions or comments from those watching or listening have to be acknowledged and answered by the electeds. All discussion or deliberation by those we elected must be held live and on camera. All votes at these e-meetings are to be taken via roll call.

In some ways this system works well. Boards and committees still hold their meetings. Citizens can participate electronically from the safety of their homes. Government services continue to be provided to those of us that pay for those services.

In other ways, this permission to hold electronic meetings exposed flaws in many areas.

Many local governments proved themselves incapable of adequately hosting a simple Zoom meeting. They either did not have the horsepower in their IT department – if they have an IT department at all -- or the ability to quickly adapt to the new meeting rules and guidelines allowed by the governor.

Many were unable to provide the mandated openness to share discussion with those watching. Some placed limits on the number of guests who were allowed to join their electronic meeting. Some eliminated visitors through an all-to-ambitious pre-screening process.

And the absence of reliable internet service in many areas of our state stood out clearly.

As a citizen, if you can't operate a computer, if you can't accept a Zoom meeting invitation, if you don't have internet service, you cannot participate in these newly-approved electronic government meetings.

In Michigan's Upper Peninsula, citizens are driving 40 miles to find internet service so they can attend a court-ordered electronic Zoom hearing.

The workings of government in the public light is a must. Not a “maybe”, a “sometimes” or even a “whenever possible”.

Our government belongs to the people. The people who pay their taxes, who elect local officials to represent them at all levels of government – from school boards all the way to those we send to Washington.

The coronavirus has challenged us all. It has made us rethink the way we live and conduct our lives. It has forced us to do things differently.

But it cannot be allowed to take from us the ability to participate in the workings of our governmental bodies. From school boards through city commissions, the people who are elected must operate in the open, face to face with and in front of those that elect them.

*Dirk Milliman, Three Rivers Commercial News*

