

Streaming (dis)service

Virtual city meetings have raised the issue of how public feedback is allowed, and whether those solutions are accessible to everyone.

BY SKYLAR LAIRD

On a snowy Monday night in February, the Columbia City Council met with almost no audience in the room. Disabilities Commission Chair Jacque Sample sat at home, watching the meeting over livestream. She'd submitted a written public comment for discussion, but was unable to discuss her feedback with the council.

Columbia, like much of the world, has come to rely more heavily on technology to get work done. Due to the pandemic, along with general accessibility concerns, the Disabilities Commission has been advocating for more virtual options to allow members of the public and people on all boards and commissions to participate in meetings.

Members of the Disabilities Commission and others have begun to wonder: If everything else can be done virtually, why can't city council meetings?

Plenty of other cities have been able to hold meetings virtually. In Missouri, the St. Louis Board of Aldermen has been conducting business via Zoom for months. Still, Columbia requires a physical quorum in order to vote.

Sample says it would be helpful for boards and commissions to be able to hold meetings without a quorum — the majority of a group's voting members — physically present. Members of the public must also attend in-person to speak.

Providing options

About 29% of adults in Missouri have some sort of disability, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

While the Disabilities Commission has been discussing virtual options since before the pandemic, the issue was exacerbated by the higher risk posed by the virus.

Sample says the Disabilities Commission began looking at the problem

from the standpoint of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The commission reached out to Troy Balthazor, an ADA consultant with Great Plains ADA Center.

He says virtual meetings are covered under the ADA as a reasonable accommodation for people unable to otherwise participate. During pandemic times, Balthazor says, this virtual option can be critical.

"It is clear that people with a wide variety of disabilities will be well-served by limiting their contact with others, especially in close quarters," he writes in a letter to the Disabilities Commission. "Modifying current procedures to adjust to the pandemic may save lives and prevent long-term health issues for people."

Remote software

The council voted in February to purchase AnyMeeting Webinar software, which will allow it to stream meetings. Using this software, members of the

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Members of the public must attend meetings in-person to speak during comment sections or hearings. However, there are ways to share your voice without physically attending. Send an email to CityClerk@CoMo.gov. Or, call the city at 874-7208. Comments must be received by 4 p.m. on the day of the meeting.

public would be able to attend meetings virtually. It would also allow city staff to provide additions on the screen like speakers' titles.

However, in testing this software, city staff realized it didn't meet ADA accommodations.

It doesn't have keyboard compatibility, which is the ability to use a program using only the keyboard and no mouse. If the software can't meet ADA requirements, the city will have to consider other options.

True accessibility

The Disabilities Commission wants one thing: accessibility for everyone, and Sample says she wants to see virtual options continue past the pandemic.

"You can move toward universal design, but it's difficult to say, 'We're going to make everything completely accessible,' and be sure it's accessible to every person because every person has their own abilities and limitations," she says.

Brian Adkisson, the city communications and creative services director, says the city strives to do just that. "We want to make sure we're doing everything we can, really, to make sure we're delivering and trying to identify all the options we can to best serve the community," he says.

Allowing virtual meetings, potentially with just the chair physically present, would be a step toward accessibility at a city level, Sample says. **V**

