

June 29, 2020

The League of Women Voters of Dane County urges you to make it a priority to facilitate the public's ability to **view** county committee meetings.

The current telephone method for members of the public to "observe" county committee meetings has serious drawbacks. Participation by phone is very burdensome. If the individual uses a cell phone, it uses many of the plan's minutes. If the individual uses a cordless phone, the lengthy time drains the battery. The listener cannot always tell who is speaking; chairs do not necessarily use full names when calling on committee members; it may not be possible to view visual presentations; and observers cannot tell if the committee members are actively engaged in the topic at hand.

Further, if the person has registered to speak on an item on the agenda, and the person is using their phone to follow the meeting, the person would have to hang up in order to facilitate the phone call from the committee to participate. This is quite awkward.

The pandemic is not a temporary problem which will be resolved in a month or two. Virtual meetings can be expected for months, and even after the pandemic offer a long-term option that would be convenient for members of the committee and members of the public who have barriers to meeting attendance such as children at home, lack of easy access to a car, and schedule challenges.

Public participation in our democracy is critical. The public needs to be able to observe their elected officials as they deliberate policies that affect them. Dane County needs to use the technology which is widely used in the work world and in other communities (including the City of Madison) to allow its residents to view virtual meetings.

Fortunately, this should not be excessively burdensome, because the Go To Meeting technology which Dane County is already using for meetings allows others to participate in the meeting while muted. The host can control who can speak.

We recognize that committee staff might struggle to include the public in the beginning, and we urge the County Executive to direct Information Management staff to facilitate this priority project: making meetings accessible to the public.

The City of Madison is using Zoom for virtual meetings, and the Madison IT Department has been working out the various kinks in their process over the last few weeks. The League presumes their experience might be informative for the county. The League would be happy to provide input on any proposed improvements to the current process.

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