

81st House District

Henry County

Columbus Office

Vern Riffe Center
77 S. High Street
14th Floor
Columbus, Ohio 43215-6111
(614) 466-3760
Rep81@ohiohouse.gov
www.ohiohouse.gov

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James Hoops State Representative

Good morning, Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Antani, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and the members of the Senate Government Oversight Committee.

Representative Claggett and I thank you for allowing us to bring House Bill 257 before you today.

House Bill 257 would allow certain public bodies to meet virtually by means of teleconference, video conference, or any other similar electronic technology.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic I was one of those individuals who was skeptical about allowing groups to conduct business virtually. I felt the technology was not good enough or even available to allow the public and even the members of the organization who wanted to hold a meeting the ability to have a meeting where frank discussions could take place and interaction between the public and the board members of the organization could occur.

But what I found through observation, doing my research, and listening to comments from the public and members of those organizations, which by the way total over 300+, by utilizing virtual meetings, public participation was much higher and so was the attendance of the members of those boards.

The goal behind the introduction of this bill is to promote more participation within meetings from both the members of the public body as well as the public that they serve.

Also, through my discussions with Members we are aware of the concerns that some Members must give certain public bodies the option to meet virtually. Due to that concern, we have included in the legislation a list of the public bodies that will be excluded from participating in virtual public meetings at this time.

Originally, we had a list of bodies that would be permitted to meet virtually but we realized this could end up being a very long list and that this bill would require an amount of unnecessary housekeeping as new committees and organizations formed through future legislation. With the addition of non-permitted organizations, new committees and organizations would be given access to virtual meetings automatically unless a policy change was made to the legislation.

HB 257 would require, before a public body could hold a virtual meeting, to adopt a policy that specifies at least all of the following:

- 1.) The public body must provide notification of a meeting 72 hours in advance of the meeting and explain how they plan to accomplish this requirement. If there happens to be an emergency the policy must state how that would be handled.
- 2.) The public body must explain how the meeting can be accessed by the public and the members of the board. The public body must ensure that the public can observe, when applicable, and hear the discussion and deliberations of all the members of the public body.
- 3.) Require that All votes taken will be done by Roll Call vote.
- 4.) Any member of the public body who decides to attend the meeting electronically must inform the Chair 48 hrs. before the meeting.
- 5.) No electronic meeting can be held if the meeting includes a vote to approve a major nonroutine expenditure or a significant hiring decision or a vote to support a tax issue or tax increase.
- 6.) When the agenda is sent out for the upcoming meeting and the greater of at least 10% of the members of the public body or two members of the public body, notifies the chairman that an item on the agenda must be discussed or acted upon at a meeting conducted fully in person, the public body must take up the item at a meeting conducted fully in person.

This legislation will also allow the Public Employees Retirement Board, the Ohio Police and Fire Pension Board, the School Employees Retirement Board, and the State Highway Patrol Retirement Board to meet virtually. They will follow the same guidelines followed by the State Teachers Retirement System Board which was approved during the 134th General Assembly.

And finally, this legislation allows the County Engineer, who is required to call an annual meeting with the township trustees and county authorities that deal with the construction and repair of roads within the county, to set this meeting virtually. This meeting is open to the public. If the Engineer decides to do it virtually the Engineer would have to follow the same guidelines mentioned earlier in this testimony.

Again, I would like to thank all members of the Senate Government Oversight Committee for your time and attention. I will now turn it over to Representative Claggett for his testimony.