

The Return of Virtual Open Meetings

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The virtual public meeting option available last year because of the COVID-19 pandemic will return with the recent passage of Sub HB 51. The Ohio Open Meetings Act requires public bodies, including Boards of Education, municipalities and other public entities, to conduct all public business in open meetings that any member of the public can attend and observe. This requirement is meant to encourage transparency in government.

In 2020, balancing the need for transparency and the need to protect the public from COVID-19, the Ohio General Assembly authorized emergency relief to the Open Meetings Act beginning March 25, 2020, and permitted public bodies to hold meetings and vote by teleconference, videoconference, or any similar electronic technology means. The emergency measure was extended through June 30, 2021 but lapsed July 1, 2021. This means that right now, public bodies cannot meet virtually and satisfy the Open Meetings Act. However, that will soon change.

Recently, Substitute House Bill 51 passed both the House and Senate and is now awaiting Governor DeWine's signature. Once signed, public bodies will again be permitted to hold public meetings by teleconference, video conference, or any other similar electronic technology through June 30, 2022. Public officials who attend virtually will count towards the quorum and be permitted to vote. Because the bill was passed with an emergency clause, as soon as the bill is signed by Governor DeWine, public bodies may once again hold its meetings virtually.

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