Update on Remote Participation in Advisory Board Meetings

Background

The Town Council is seeking to attract persons from diverse backgrounds and groups, and persons with special expertise, to serve on the Town's advisory boards and commissions. The Town Council believes that the timing and location of meetings in many cases can be a deterrent for many qualified and interested Town residents to serve on its advisory boards and commissions.

On March 6, 2017, the Town Council passed a resolution (2017-03-06/R-10[1]) establishing a one-year pilot effort to determine whether allowing advisory board members to participate remotely in advisory board meetings would help to address problems with participation and attendance, and whether the technology to facilitate remote participation is feasible in spaces where advisory boards meet.

Status

- **March – May 2017**: Technology Solutions (TS) and Communications and Public Affairs (CaPA) worked together to determine what technology and other equipment would be needed to support video conferencing in the Council Chamber and other rooms in Town Hall where advisory boards meet. (Completed May 2017)

- **May – July 2017**: Advisory boards that meet in the Council Chamber and other rooms in Town Hall were invited to pilot remote participation if members are interested. TS and CaPA have made themselves available to assist with setting up the technology needed to facilitate remote participation. (Ongoing)

- **September 2017**: Technology Solutions (TS) and Communications and Public Affairs (CaPA) determined what technology is needed to support video conferencing in areas of the Town other than the Council Chamber and other rooms in Town Hall (e.g., Chapel Hill Public Library).

- **September 2017**: CaPA prepared an email update for Town Council on the status of the remote participation pilot.

- **October – December 2017**: Advisory boards that meet in areas of the Town other than the Council Chamber and other rooms in Town Hall (e.g., Chapel Hill Public Library) can self-select to pilot remote participation if members are interested. TS and CaPA were available to assist with setting up the technology needed to facilitate remote

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[1] http://chapelhill.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=7&clip_id=3044&meta_id=154166

participation with the intention to pass this responsibility to staff liaisons after the first two or three meetings at which the video conferencing technology is used.

- **October 2017 – June 2018**: TS, CaPA, and staff liaisons continue to work together to troubleshoot any issues and refine the process for facilitating remote participation by advisory board members in board meetings. (Ongoing)

- **June 2018**: CaPA prepares a report for Town Council that addresses whether allowing advisory board members to participate remotely in advisory board meetings has helped to address problems with participation and attendance, and whether the technology to facilitate remote participation is feasible in spaces where advisory boards meet.

Feedback

- Between May and October 2017, two advisory board members participated remotely in advisory board meetings. One member remotely connected to two separate Transportation and Connectivity Advisory Board meetings in the first floor conference room. The board member successfully connected using Cisco WebEx. He shared feedback that the microphone picked up lots of background noise and the camera did not catch everything (angle too narrow). Another member reinforced the importance of staff testing WebEx with the user prior to the meeting. Board members who participate remotely receive a short web survey after the meeting to help us track feedback from users.

- Staff reported that use of the "chat" function in WebEx caused a distraction during one meeting. Staff also noted concern that it seems remote users are less able to participate fully in board discussion.

- Staff sent a reminder to boards and commissions in October 2017 about the remote participation pilot.

- In February 2018, staff liaisons were asked again how many members had participated remotely. Only two board members participated remotely in advisory board meetings between November 2017 and January 2018. Staff was asked what they felt were barriers to remote participation. Their responses included:
  - "Members only seemed interested if it counted toward a quorum but it doesn't, so they said they'll pass."
  - "No participation on the BOA as I believe it isn't allowed on quasi-judicial hearings. Having said that, I suppose it could be used for typical board business and no one has participated for those items either. I believe that long-standing means of doing business have simply not made this a priority for the board."
  - "…the barriers were that the no-shows we've had have been last minute things or sickness/out of town."

- "We had two people this past fall use WebEx. In all cases the participants left the meeting early to do other things (as opposed to being disconnected). In each instance the person remoting in didn't seem to participate fully in the conversation and in some cases had trouble hearing the discussion even though they were permitted to vote. For the most part the participants were quiet or muted themselves. I would say it was mixed experience—there were some negatives mentioned above including the extra staff time to set it up. The positives were probably that the member remoting in didn't have to be marked absent and could still continue his work obligations. However, I don't think the remote participation added value to the Board's work or their discussions"
- "…none [of the reasons why members have been absent] involve any barriers around remote participation."