

Council Will Not Reinstiate Hybrid Meeting Format



Virtual testimony option will not be renewed.

Several Maryland jurisdictions conduct virtual legislative hearings; Howard, Montgomery and Frederick are examples. And many AA County Boards and Commissions hold hybrid public meetings. However, in recent discussions with the Chair of the Anne Arundel County Council, GAN has learned that there are no plans to restart the option for virtual citizen testimony at Council meetings.

Past Council Chairs have pointed to technology problems, staffing issues, Council rules conflicts, and a leak into chamber walls as reasons for not reinstating the use of hybrid meetings. But now we are told that the majority of Council members do not have an appetite for restoring the hybrid option for testimony and have not shared any interest in moving in that direction.

Many County residents live at least a 30-minute drive from the Council chambers, have disabilities, lack transportation, have personal scheduling conflicts or a host of other reasons that preclude attending Council meetings in person to give a 2-minute testimony on a bill. By blocking the virtual option, the Council sends a message to these residents that the Councilmembers are not interested in hearing their comments.

In some ways the perspective of the Councilmembers is understandable. In this part-time job with limited staff support they have been very busy dealing with the County budget, Regional Plans and Comprehensive Zoning, and the several large bills that have come before them in prior months. Council meetings have extended into late hours and revision of meeting schedules has sometimes been required. Making time for even more citizen testimony would make meetings longer and exacerbate demands on their time. And, like many of us, Councilmembers often come to meetings with their decisions already made on a bill, so that further citizen testimony is irrelevant.

The heart of this problem seems to be that Councilmembers do not have time to listen to all residents that want to convey their opinion. What can we learn from nearby jurisdictions about this problem? First of all, some nearby counties provide much more staff support for their Council members. This frees up more time for Council members to respond to citizen communication. Secondly, many jurisdictions have a Planning Commission that provides the first review of land use bills and is a venue for citizen input. The recommendations of the Commission are then passed to the Council which can use them as a filter to allow discussions to focus on key features without excessive use of Council member time.

GAN members are encouraged to contact their Councilmember and request that the Council change its rules to allow hybrid meetings and hire as much staff as their current budget allows. The County Executive should also be requested to structure future budgets to provide support for more Council staff.

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