

URGENT: Virtual Public Meeting Guidelines for Remote Participation

Monday, 03-23-2020

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Public of use of remote participation and “virtual” meetings:

In consideration of the ongoing COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak, Governor Baker issued an emergency Order on March 12, 2020, allowing public bodies greater flexibility in utilizing technology in the conduct of meetings under the Open Meeting Law. The Town of Hardwick greatly values the participation of its citizens in the public meeting process, but given the current circumstances and recommendations at both the state and federal levels to limit or avoid public gatherings, including Governor Baker’s March 23, 2020 ban on gatherings of more than 10 people, together with the present closure of Hardwick Municipal Office Building and other public buildings to the public, the town has decided to implement the “remote participation” procedures allowed under Governor Baker’s emergency Order for all boards, committees, and commissions. This means that:

1. All or any of the members of the public body may choose to participate in a public meeting via remote access. Meetings may be virtual, in their entirety.
2. The public will not be allowed into a Board/Committee meeting, even where there are any members of the public body and/or town staff or official(s) physically present at the meeting location during the meeting. “Public comment” portions of meetings will be temporarily suspended.
3. However, the public will be provided with alternative access through which they can watch or listen to meetings “in real time,” and meeting notices will specify the manner in which members of the public may access audio or video of the meeting as it is occurring.
4. If, despite our best efforts, our technological capabilities do not adequately support public access to virtual or remote meetings, the town will ensure that an audio or video recording, transcript, or other comprehensive record of the proceedings at the meeting is posted on the town’s website as soon as possible after the meeting.
5. Notices for public hearings will contain additional information about how the public may participate via electronic/technological means.
6. For executive session meetings, public access to the meeting will be limited to the open session portion(s) of the meeting only. Public access to any audio, video, internet or web-based broadcast of the meeting will be discontinued when the public body enters executive session.
7. Where individuals have a right, or are required, to attend a public meeting or hearing, including executive session meetings, they will be provided with information about how to participate in the meeting/hearing remotely.
8. Meeting notices will still be posted at least 48 hours in advance (not counting Saturdays, Sundays, or legal holidays), unless it is an emergency meeting as defined under the Open Meeting Law (in which

event, the meeting notice will be posted with as much advanced notice as is possible in the circumstances). Minutes will still be taken.

Please check individual meeting agendas on the calendar on the town's website, located at www.townofhardwick.com, for the latest information regarding meetings. Each meeting may experience unique circumstances that may require last minute changes in protocol, including cancellation or rescheduling.

We appreciate your patience as we undergo this shift in a significant aspect of how the town conducts business.