

Tips for NH Land Use Boards during the COVID-19 Outbreak

The Planning Division of the New Hampshire Office of Strategic Initiatives (NHOSI) offers the following compiled tips that have been shared by municipalities and others for land use boards when conducting business, such as virtual meetings and site visits during the COVID-19 outbreak. This list will be updated continuously as additional tips are obtained. **New tips are highlighted in yellow for your convenience.** If you would like to share a tip that is not currently included in this document, please email it to: OSInfo@osi.nh.gov.

Please Note: NHOSI has compiled these tips for informational purposes only and does not endorse any products, methods, or processes. This document does not constitute legal advice, and this list is not intended to be instructions on how to conduct business. NHOSI strongly recommends that a municipality consult with its attorney for legal advice, including how to ensure that its practices comply with the law during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Virtual Meeting - Administrative Tips

- Check the online meeting's settings to ensure that the meeting is controlled only by municipal officials to restrict who can take control of the meeting.
- Have board members (and members of the public) test their virtual meeting setup before the meeting to minimize IT disruptions.
- Consider holding trial public meetings for the sole purpose of testing your setup and process.
- Consider dedicating two meetings per agenda item to encourage public participation. By continuing an item to a second meeting, members of the public have additional time to provide comments and feedback.
- If using Zoom for large public meetings or hearings, consider upgrading to, and paying for, the Zoom Webinar platform (versus Zoom Meeting). Whereas the Meeting platform is intended for collaboration and interaction, Zoom Webinar is better for large audiences. In the Webinar platform, you can designate the Board and the Applicant as Panelists to allow for screen sharing (which is good for discussing plans). The public can be designated as view-only Attendees, with the ability to speak by using the "raise hand" or "Q&A" features. This allows staff to control the meeting (and prevents "Zoom Bombing") while encouraging public participation.

Virtual Meeting - Tips for Meeting Notice

- Bitly, TinyURL, or similar products are useful tools to create short URLs to replace longer ones when posting the online meeting's access information in the meeting notice.
- Provide an email address in the meeting notice where someone can use to request the log in information for the meeting.

Virtual Meeting - Tips on Meeting Documents Availability

- Post all public meeting materials online (i.e. town web site, DropBox, Google Docs, shared through the online meeting system).
- Upon request, email interested individuals link to online materials or the documents themselves.
- Include a copy of required documents in the mail with the abutter notice.
- Make public meeting documents available at the town office to view through a window as an additional option to viewing the meeting documents online.
- Work with residents on a case-by-case basis if anyone is having difficulty obtaining electronic documents.

Virtual Meeting - Tips for When the Meeting is Being Held

- The Chair should clearly explain the virtual meeting process at the beginning of the meeting. Start meeting by taking a Roll Call attendance.
- Well in advance of the meeting, provide an email address and a phone number for someone to use if they experience an issue participating in the meeting. In the event the public is unable to access the meeting, the board will adjourn the meeting and have it rescheduled.
- If participating in a non-public session, ensure that your conversation cannot be overheard by others.
- Remember that boards participating remotely must still:
 - identify the reason why the in-person attendance of any remote board members is not reasonably practicable in the minutes of the meeting;
 - identify any persons present in the location where the board member is calling from; and
 - take all votes by roll call.

Virtual Meeting - General Meeting Conduct Tips

- If participating via video, remember that your appearance matters. Dress appropriately and make sure that your background is appropriate for a public meeting. Consider adjusting lighting and your camera position to optimize your video appearance.
- Make efforts to speak one at a time. You may have to pause before speaking if there is a time lag in your audio/video.
- Mute your microphone when not speaking. Consider using a headset or earbuds if you are in an area with background noise.

Site Visit Tips

- Advise the public of any special site visit protocol in advance, including as part of the public notice.
- Travel separately to the site, wear masks, keep physically distant from one another at all times, and speak loudly for all to hear.
- Have applicants show site via video feed during virtual meeting. Have applicant practice with municipal staff in advance of site visit to help minimize problems and maximize helpfulness.
- Options to consider for attendance during site visit:
 - Attempt to minimize attendees by delegating a reduced number of land use board members to attend and request a limited number of applicant's representatives. Remind public that no decisions will be made during the site visit.
 - If many people wish to participate, consider breaking into smaller groups.
 - Land use board members perform site visits on their own.