



COLORADO
MUNICIPAL
LEAGUE

January 2021

TIPS FOR
**Enhancing professionalism
during virtual meetings of
local government**

Robert (Bob) Widner¹ | 2020-2021 CML Executive Board president | Widner Juran LLP | Attorneys & Counselors at Law | Centennial, Colorado



Empowered cities and towns, united for a strong Colorado

Tips for enhancing professionalism during virtual meetings of local government

To reduce the risk of person-to-person transmission of the COVID-19 virus, nearly all Colorado local governments at least occasionally resort to alternative meeting platforms to conduct what we now call “virtual meetings.” Common alternatives to in-person public meetings are web-based virtual meeting platforms such as Zoom, Go to Meeting, RemotePC, and Microsoft Teams. It is likely that the use of these platforms will continue into the future as an option for the conduct of public meetings.

Local governments readily recognize that public meetings are a primary means by which citizens observe and judge the conduct of government. To ensure a higher level of efficiency and professionalism during in-person meetings, most local governments employ uniform practices and impose rules on the conduct of the public meetings. These practices and rules are tailored to instill public confidence in government decision making through procedures that promote efficiency and professionalism.

Should the nature of virtual meetings lessen the concern that open meetings be efficient and professional and foster ongoing efforts to instill confidence in government? Assuredly, no.

This article offers tips and suggestions to local government elected officials and staff to help ensure that virtual public meetings maintain the same formality, efficiency, and professionalism as an in-person meeting.

Although there are many similarities between in-person and virtual meetings, there is at least one important difference. An attendee observing an in-person meeting will view the meeting within a much larger context. That is, during an in-person meeting, an attendee’s attention is diverted to a significantly greater number of visual points of interest within





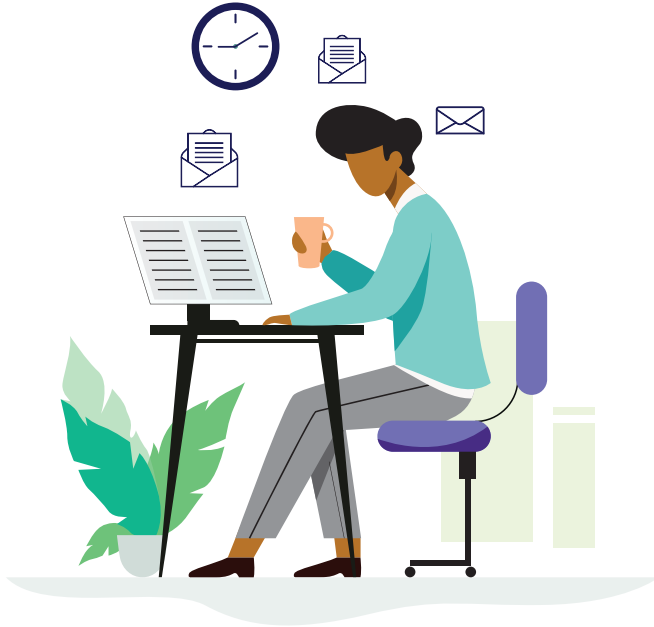
the meeting room. Within this larger view of the room, the attendee observes the workings of the staff meeting members, the comings and goings of other attendees, the displays from monitors, screens, and handouts, and a host of other actions and activities that can absorb and divert the attendee's attention. Moreover, attendees are often seated at a significant distance from the decision-making body and the attendees' views may be obscured in part by computer monitors, the dais, and other attendees seated in the meeting room.

In contrast to the in-person meeting, the virtual meeting focuses the attendee's view to a much more limited, and much closer, visual display of the faces of the members of the decision-making body. In effect, the meeting members' images are made available for a high level of scrutiny not commonly available during an in-person meeting.



Bob Widner is a founding partner of the Colorado local government law firm of Widner Juran LLP in Centennial, Colorado. During his more than 32 years of representing local governments, Bob has served as the city, town, or county attorney for communities throughout Colorado and has served as the City Attorney for Centennial, Colo, since 2004. Bob served as president of the Colorado Municipal League (2020-21), is a recipient of the Marvin J. Glink Award conferred upon the nation's outstanding municipal attorney in private practice and is one of fewer than 120 attorneys worldwide to be appointed as a Fellow with the International Municipal Lawyers Association (IMLA). More about Bob can be found at lawwj.com.

It is therefore important that the meeting member remember to consistently project an image of engagement, attention, and professionalism perhaps even more so than during an in-person meeting. The following suggestions provide ways to facilitate that trust-invoking representation.



Prepare for the virtual meeting

Preparing for a virtual meeting is no different than preparing for an in-person meeting. Preparation is always necessary to allow the meeting member to effectively participate. However, a meeting member's lack of preparation may be more observable during a virtual meeting. Due to the closer view of a meeting member's face and the ability to observe where the meeting member's attention is diverted during the meeting, the meeting member's consistent or frequent reading of materials and sorting through the meeting packet can project to a greater degree a disconnection with the meeting that can appear to viewers as the member being underprepared.

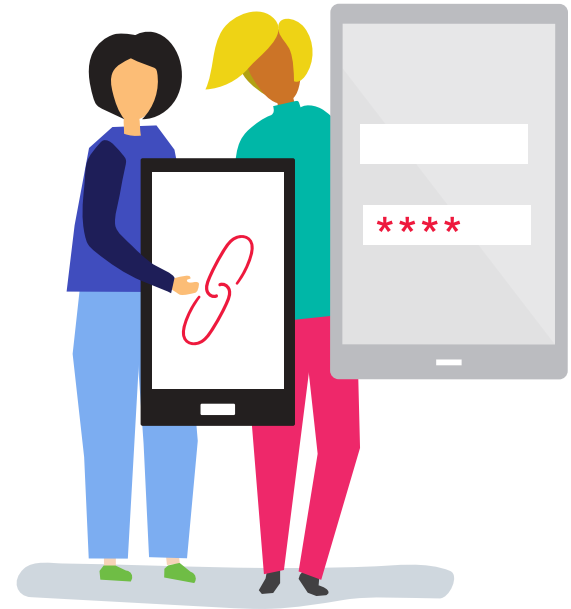
An overlooked aspect of preparation for a virtual meeting is the need to practice and understand the proper operation of the virtual meeting software program. Practice may oftentimes enable you to troubleshoot problems more efficiently during the meeting. For example, knowing where to locate and manipulate the application's controls for microphone volume, speakers, and camera will enable the member to cure a problem without interrupting or delaying the meeting in order to seek assistance.

Ensure you have the meeting invitation or access link in advance

An important, and often avoidable, disruption in any meeting is a meeting member's tardiness. Assuredly, unforeseeable problems arise at times that will result in a late arrival, but late arrivals often delay the start of the meeting while the body awaits the tardy meeting member's arrival and may disrupt the meeting while the tardy meeting member takes a seat or logs in. For virtual meetings, tardiness due to an inability to locate the meeting invitation or access link may be largely avoidable. Much like knowing "where the car is parked and the car keys are located" to avoid a late arrival to an in-person meeting, the virtual meeting member must know how to easily access the meeting link.

Log into the meeting in advance

Armed with the meeting invitation or access link, the meeting member should always make the effort to log in early enough to ensure that the link is correct and to remedy any problem should the link prove defective or there be a need to adjust the camera and volume level. It is not uncommon that one or more meeting members disrupt the timely commencement of the meeting with panicked texts and emails to staff and other meeting members seeking help in gaining access. Because the solution to fix a defective link or the inability to access is often simple, the best time to seek assistance in finding the remedy is before the meeting is scheduled to begin and not after.



Set up your camera in advance

The meeting member's relationship to the camera is significant in importance during a virtual meeting. It is through the camera that the meeting member will engage the public and project an image that is both professional and representative of the importance and decorum of the public meeting.

Room lighting. It is necessary to ensure that the room lighting for the time of the meeting is appropriate. Room lighting varies throughout the day and what worked wonderfully and rendered an image not unlike a movie star at 2 p.m. may project a dark, shadowed, and indecipherable face at the time of the public meeting. Too often, a meeting member will spend the beginning of the meeting adjusting their camera and the lighting, which can be distracting to other meeting members.

Camera angle. Perhaps overlooked too often is the image displayed by the camera angle. The camera should be located to afford a direct front view of the meeting member's face at a level substantially similar to the angle desired during one-on-one in-person discussion. The goal is to position the camera to allow an image of direct eye contact with the viewer and simulate the same attentive view that is afforded when speaking one-on-one with another person. Any other camera angle risks projecting an image that the meeting member is disconnected or disinterested in the meeting. Angles that project the side of the meeting member's face while the member views a monitor located to the side of the

camera can present the appearance that the meeting member is conducting other business unrelated to the meeting. Camera angles that position the eyes of the meeting member either above or below the camera will present a disinterested view, much like the view provided during a one-on-one discussion when the meeting member is talking with someone yet looking away or out the window.

Critically consider your choice of camera background

The most common background associated with a meeting member's camera image is the member's home or office setting. When this is the case, consider taking a critical view of your background to ensure you are projecting a professional image. Simple camera adjustments can remove from view what might otherwise be a distraction for other viewers.

Some virtual meeting platforms allow the use of virtual backgrounds or full screen images of pictures and patterns projected behind the speaker. Although virtual backgrounds can be an entertaining option, some consideration should be given to the appropriateness of the virtual background that is projected. Obviously, images that display political or commercial messages may detract from the decorum and the purpose of the public meeting. Images that are unrelated to the business at hand or unrelated to the community, such as images of federal or state

capitals, exotic island beaches, or personal images of children or family, can create an image that may be viewed as inconsistent with the importance and purpose of the meeting.

Some communities require the use of uniform or standardized virtual backgrounds for elected officials and administrative staff. These backgrounds may, for example, project the logo of the community, the community's civic center, or another image that is representative of the community and that advances the professionalism, purpose, and decorum of the meeting.

Check audio settings - volume and speakers

Not uncommonly, meeting members are unable to hear other attendees or are unable to be heard. The reason is often due to misadjusted microphone volume or speaker levels. By logging into the virtual meeting early, the meeting member is afforded the opportunity to check volume and speaker levels.

During the meeting, remain aware that some headsets and wired in-line microphones can produce gaps in sound and make it difficult for listeners to hear your comments. Some headsets and in-line microphones have noise cancelling features that can cause the microphone to “cut-out” when the speaker's voice projects harshly into the microphone or when the in-line microphone rubs against the speaker's shirt.

Be aware of the potential for the broadcast of pre-meeting comments

Once logged into the virtual meeting, use caution when greeting others in the meeting room and engaging in pre-meeting banter. Because virtual meetings make it difficult to “see” all the persons who are “standing next to you in the room,” meeting members may be lulled into a feeling of privacy akin to the casual, and often private, conversation that precedes an in-person meeting. Unfortunately, the virtual meeting microphones may be active, and the public may hear pre-meeting conversations. This is not to say that “hello” and “how are you” banter is unacceptable, but more substantive discussion about matters on the agenda and, at times, efforts at humor such as “I am not ready for this meeting because I couldn't find my vodka” can unintentionally project an unprofessional view to the general public.

Remove nearby phones or electronics

As you would during an in-person meeting, remove or silence all telephones and other electronic devices from the area near your camera and microphone. A ringing mobile phone is amplified in volume during virtual meetings and can create a disruption far more alarming than the same phone ringing during an in-person meeting. Remove, silence, or unplug other noise producing devices such as landline telephones in the room during the meeting.

Remain aware of the potential for meeting confusion from multiple speakers talking over each other

Some meeting platforms allow more than one speaker to speak at a time. Such cross-talk leads to an inability for attendees to hear and understand the discussion. It is important that the meeting's chairperson continuously manage the speakers' opportunities to speak in order to ensure a clear and understandable meeting. Nothing is more unprofessional and frustrating to those seeking to participate in a meeting than to be unable to hear the conversation and understand the comments.

Befriend the mute button

A common but avoidable disruption during virtual meetings stems from background noise caused by a live microphone. Rustling papers, a squeaking chair, a barking dog, or the inflective utterance of disapproval or disgust during the meeting are exceedingly common. The mute button can be your best friend when seeking to avoid such disruptions or, at times, embarrassments. Diligence in reactivating the microphone when you wish to speak is also necessary and, with practice, becomes regular or routine. Unfortunately, due to the relative novelty of conducting virtual meetings, few meetings fail to include the announcement that "your mute button is on."





Observe common in-person meeting etiquette

Perhaps due to being physically alone during a virtual meeting, some members may engage in activities that would be deemed unacceptable during an in-person meeting. These activities range from leaving the room frequently, using the telephone, evident multitasking, and a host of other actions too numerous to mention. During a typical in-person meeting, you would not cover your face for extended periods of time and then uncover your face only when you desired to speak, so shutting off your video during the virtual meeting should be avoided unless that practice is established as part of the meeting's rules.

Especially for meetings where the public is in attendance, meeting professionalism can be enhanced by dressing appropriately for the meeting. Proper dress can display a level of respect for the meeting and its purpose.

Follow established rules for motions and procedures

There should be little difference between procedures followed during an in-person meeting and a virtual meeting. The same rules of procedure for making motions, requiring seconds, and considering agenda items should apply. A primary purpose of local rules of procedure is to ensure fairness and equity among participants. Virtual meetings do not alter the need for fairness and equity. Follow the rules of procedure whenever possible.

Log off and then double check the microphone and camera are off

During in-person meetings, you are visible and audible to the other participants in the meeting room until you completely exit the room. For virtual meetings, the same is true. Until such time that you turn off your access, your camera, and your microphone, you remain “live” to any remaining meeting participants. Make the effort to doublecheck your exit in order to avoid the types of embarrassing examples of meeting errors available through YouTube (search *youtube.com* with the search words “embarrassing video meetings”). Remember, the meeting is not over until you have exited the room.

Local governments expend considerable effort to ensure that in-person meetings project professionalism and efficiency in pursuit of the important and laudable goal of instilling confidence in government. Because the virtual nature of a public meeting does not diminish this goal, members of local governments should always strive to ensure the same attentiveness to professionalism and efficiency for the virtual meeting.



This page intentionally left blank.



COLORADO
MUNICIPAL
LEAGUE

**Empowered cities and towns,
united for a strong Colorado**

1144 Sherman St. • Denver, CO • 80203

303 831 6411 / 866 578 0936

www.cml.org