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## Sample Missouri Video Conference Meeting Policy

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In 2013, the Missouri General Assembly adopted SB 170, which amended § 610.015, RSMo to allow roll call votes to be cast by elected members of a public governmental body who are attending by video conference. While this measure was vetoed by the Governor, the General Assembly overrode that veto in its special veto session. Prior to the amendment, roll call votes could only be cast by members physically present at the meeting. Practical implementation of this amendment may be difficult due to ambiguity of the language caused by undefined terms as well as public policy concerns related to the public's desire to have elected officials physically present at meetings for face-to-face interaction.

In light of these concerns a municipality should consider adopting a policy establishing parameters for video conference attendance of meetings by members of public governmental body. While the most appropriate policy for any municipality is one determined in the specific factual context of the community, we have provided a sample policy for adoption as an insertion to an existing policy, or as a stand-alone policy addressing the practical application of meetings having a video conference component.

In addition to the language we recommend for a resolution or ordinance adopting this policy, we have embedded footnotes in each subsection to describe some of the policy considerations that should be made in conjunction with the adoption of this policy. These footnotes are for the information of the public governmental body considering the adoption of this policy, and as such the footnotes and explanatory information in *italic font* should be deleted from the final version of the ordinance or resolution ultimately adopted by the public governmental body.

### **Ordinance or Resolution Language:**

#### **1. Section \_\_\_\_\_. Meetings Using Video Conference Technology.**

- a. Policy Statement.<sup>1</sup> While it is legally permissible for members of the City's public governmental bodies to attend meetings and vote via video conference transmission,

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<sup>1</sup> *This policy statement is designed to balance the benefits of additional participation from members who would not otherwise be available to be physically present with the concern that elected and appointed officials should take*

a member's use of video conference attendance should occur only sparingly.<sup>2</sup> Because it is good public policy for citizens to have the opportunity to meet with their elected officials face-to-face, elected members of a public governmental body should endeavor to be physically present at all meetings unless attendance is unavoidable after exercising due diligence to arrange for physical presence at the meeting. The primary purpose of attendance by video conference connection should be to accommodate the public governmental body as a whole to allow meetings to occur when circumstances would otherwise prevent the physical attendance of a quorum of the body's members. A secondary purpose of attendance by video conference should be to ensure that all members may participate in business of the public governmental body that is emergency or highly important in nature and arose quickly so as to make attendance at a regular meeting practically impossible. Except in emergency situations, all efforts should be expended to ensure that a quorum of the members of the public governmental body be physical present at the normal meeting place of the body.<sup>3</sup>

- b. Video Conference Defined.<sup>4</sup> For purposes of this section "video conference" or "videoconferencing" shall refer to a means of communication where at least one member of a public government body participates in the public meeting via an electronic connection made up of three components: (1) a live video transmission of the member of the public governmental body not in physical attendance; (2) a live audio transmission allowing the member of the public governmental body not in physical attendance to be heard by those in physical attendance; and (3) a live audio transmission allowing the member of the public governmental body not in physical attendance to hear those in physical attendance at a meeting.<sup>5</sup> If at any time during a

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*their roles seriously and make attendance at meetings a priority in their schedules. Evidence of these concerns can be found in the legislative intent as expressed by Senator Chappelle-Nadal and by Governor Nixon. (Senator Chappelle-Nadal's brief explanation behind the bill can be found on her website at: <http://www.senate.mo.gov/13info/members/mem14.htm> and the Governor's veto letter can be found at: <http://www.senate.mo.gov/13info/GovLetters/SB170.pdf>.)*

<sup>2</sup> § 610.015, RSMo does not restrain on the use of videoconferencing; rather videoconferencing is allowed and now has been extended by the amendment to § 610.015 to allow roll call votes to be cast in meetings held using this technology. Despite this, some have grown concerned that videoconferencing undermines the public's desire to meet face-to-face with its elected and appointed officials as they carry out the public's work. Nevertheless, there are instances where videoconferencing can be a useful tool to allow public governmental bodies to function where circumstances prevent a quorum of members from attending a public meeting. Likewise, videoconferencing may be necessary in times of emergency for a public governmental body to meet and conduct official business, even that requiring a roll call vote, in order to act in the best interest of the community. As a measure of best practice, a municipality should consider the balancing of these concerns in its own context and adopt a policy to establish expectations of members of a public governmental body with respect to the use of videoconferencing technology at meetings.

<sup>3</sup> Practically, if multiple members of the public governmental body cannot be in physical attendance at a meeting the body should consider rescheduling the meeting and/or holding a special meeting that is more accommodating to the body's schedule.

<sup>4</sup> Videoconferencing is not expressly defined in the Sunshine Law, but it is good public policy for all participants in a meeting to be able to see, hear, and fully communicate with one another because it both focuses the members on the governmental tasks at hand and also ensures to confirm the identity of the participants (thus preventing any risk of impersonation).

<sup>5</sup> In defining "public meeting" at § 610.010(5), RSMo, the General Assembly indicates meetings may be conducted in person or by means of communication equipment, including "conference call, video conference, internet chat, or

meeting one or more of the elements of a video conference becomes compromised (e.g., if any participants are unable to see, hear, or fully communicate), then the video conference participant is deemed immediately absent and this absence should be reflected in the minutes. A video conference participant's absence may compromise a quorum in which case the applicable Missouri laws shall take effect regarding a broken quorum.

- c. Frequency of Use of Video Conference Attendance. A member of a public governmental body shall not attend more than \_\_\_ meetings via video conference in a rolling twelve-month period.<sup>6</sup> In keeping with the policy stated in subsection (a) above, attendance via video conference should only occur sparingly and for good cause. Such good cause shall be at the discretion of the member seeking to attend by video conference, but shall be for significant reasons such as serious illness or injury of the member or a member of his or her immediate family, including father or mother, spouse, sibling, child, or grandchild.<sup>7</sup>
- d. Physical Location. Members of the public may not participate in a public meeting of a governmental body via video conference.<sup>8</sup> The public wishing to attend a meeting, and elected officials not participating via videoconferencing of a meeting, shall participate at the physical location where meetings of the public governmental body are typically held, or as provided in a notice provided in accordance with the Sunshine Law. The public governmental body shall cause there to be provided at the physical location communication equipment consisting of an audio and visual display, and a camera and microphone so that the member(s) of the public governmental body participating via videoconferencing, the members of the public governmental body in physical attendance, and the public in physical attendance may actively participate in the meeting in accordance with rules of meeting decorum. The communication equipment at the physical location of the meeting must allow for all meeting attendees to see, hear, and fully communicate with the videoconferencing participant.<sup>9</sup>

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*internet message board..." The use of "video conference" in this serial list suggests that "videoconferencing" cannot be a "conference call", "internet chat", or "internet message board."*

<sup>6</sup> *This provision is likely to be one of the most difficult provision to agree upon and enforce as it begs very difficult questions of where to "draw the line" as to whether to include a hard cap on the number of video conference meetings a member may use and what happens if all of those meetings have been used and another tragic event occurs for a particular member. However, this was chief among the concerns raised by the Governor in his veto letter as a potential method of abusing the use of this technology. Obviously, both the cap and the time frame against which the cap is measured can be modified.*

<sup>7</sup> *This also represents a potentially controversial topic to be addressed for this policy as it attempts to define what is or isn't a catastrophic event for a particular member. Alternative methods for addressing this issue would include expanding or retracting the list of example "significant events," or making the matter the subject of a vote of the other members of the public governmental body before allowing the video conference attendance to occur.*

<sup>8</sup> *The language of the statute reflects this assertion however, the Sunshine Laws might lend themselves to an interpretation that if members of the public governmental body may participate via videoconferencing, so too can the public. Such an interpretation would cause an undue logistical burden on government bodies to provide the equipment and technology to support participation of this nature by both elected officials and members of the public.*

<sup>9</sup> *§ 610.020.4, RSMo, requires all public meetings be reasonably accessible to the public. To the extent legally required, meetings should be held in facilities appropriate for the anticipated amount of attending public and be accessible to persons with disabilities as required by the ADA and Sunshine Law. This will require the video*

- e. Voting. Elected members<sup>10</sup> of a public governmental body attending a public meeting of that governmental body via video conference are deemed present for purposes of participating in a roll call vote to the same effect elected members of a public governmental body in physical attendance at a public meeting of that governmental body are deemed present.<sup>11</sup> As indicated in subsection (b) above, if any component of the video conference communication fails during the meeting, the member attending the meeting by video conference whose connection failed shall be deemed absent immediately upon such failure, and if the public governmental body was in the act of voting, the voting shall stop until all of the components of video conference attendance are again restored and the video conference participant's presence is again noted in the minutes.
- f. Closed Meetings. In a meeting where a member of a public governmental body is participating via videoconferencing and the meeting goes into a closed session, all provisions of Missouri law and City ordinances relating to closed sessions apply. Upon the public governmental body's vote to close the meeting, all members of the general public shall not be present. Likewise, a member of a public governmental body participating via videoconferencing must ensure there are no members of the public present at their location to see, hear, or otherwise communicate during the closed session.<sup>12</sup> The member must also take all reasonable precautions to guard against interception of communication by others. Failure to ensure the requirements of this subsection may result in corrective action by the full public governmental body in accordance with City regulations.
- g. Minutes. In the meeting, whether in open or in closed session, the minutes taken should reflect the member, if any, participating via video conference; the members in physical attendance; and members, if any, absent.<sup>13</sup>

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*conference participant be accessible to the public in attendance and to any in attendance with disabilities meaning a screen projecting the participant will need to be at the physical meeting location that is large enough and placed in a location for all to view and speakers provide audio so that everyone may hear the video conference participant. To utilize full communication, there must also be a microphone and camera so that any member of the public (or elected official in physical attendance) may communicate back to the video conference participant. The camera should be able to focus on anyone speaking at any one time and the microphone should be able to relate any expressions made by a meeting attendee directed to others in attendance.*

<sup>10</sup> *Note that previously the physical presence requirement only applied when (1) votes were taken by roll call; and (2) the public governmental body consisted entirely of elected officials (except for the General Assembly and a committee established by a public governmental body). Thus, bodies consisting of non-elected officials have always had the ability to meet and vote, even by roll call, notwithstanding the 2013 amendment. As roll call voting now applies to many more votes and roll call votes are completed over a longer time frame than non-roll call votes, it is even more necessary to develop a policy for the situation when a video conference connection fails during the act of voting.*

<sup>11</sup> *Consistent with § 610.015, RSMo.*

<sup>12</sup> *The location of a person who is participating via video conference can vastly vary. In fact by its very nature they can be participating from almost any location imaginable. The implications of this are such that they may not be isolated from other people at their location making it more difficult to comply with the requirements of a meeting closing to the public than if they were at the physical meeting location. It is however, of the utmost importance that should a meeting go into a closed session the video conference participant completely isolate themselves from anyone else.*

<sup>13</sup> *§ 610.020.7, RSMo requires the journal of minutes of the meeting, whether open or closed, to reflect members present and members absent. To carefully comply with this statute it should expand the reflection of members*

- h. Emergency meetings. In the event that emergency circumstances create impossibility for the members of a public governmental body to physically attend the body as a whole may meet, and if necessary vote, by video conference. Examples of such emergency circumstances include, but are not limited to, war, riot, terrorism, widespread fire, or natural disaster such as earthquake, tornado, hurricane, flood, or blizzard. To the extent possible in such circumstances, the public governmental body shall use reasonable efforts to cause a physical location to be provided for public attendance and participation.

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*present to distinguish those physically present and the elected official participating via video conference (although technically if participating via video conference the member is deemed "present").*