

March 16, 2020

VIA E-MAIL DELIVERY ONLY

John Gallagher & Karen White
Executive Director & General Counsel
Louisiana Municipal Association

Guy Cormier
Executive Director
Louisiana Police Jury Association

Janet Pope, PhD.
Executive Director
Louisiana School Boards Association

RE: Open Meetings Law Requirements and COVID-19

Mr. Gallagher, Ms. White, Mr. Cormier and Ms. Pope:

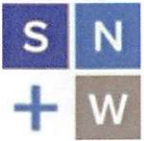
As you know, I am general counsel to the Louisiana Press Association and several media entities throughout the state of Louisiana. I have had the privilege to work with you, or your organizations, throughout the years and look forward to working with you again through the oncoming crisis and beyond.

In these unprecedented and trying times, we have a number of issues facing our state and our nation. One of these is limiting public access to events in order to “flatten the curve” and prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus, or COVID-19. Another is the public’s right of access to government meetings. Given the spread of this pandemic, the two may sometimes conflict, and we recognize that this conflict may be unavoidable.

It appears that the Louisiana Legislature will explore a temporary accommodation to public bodies,¹ who are required to follow the Open Meetings Law. We are working with, not against, the Legislature to ensure that the public’s right of access as provided in the Louisiana Constitution and the Open Meetings Law are preserved as best they can be. We are further working to ensure that any suspension or accommodation is only temporary and due to the extraordinary nature of this crisis.

In the meantime, we ask that you, as the respective heads of your associations, try your best to ensure press access to meetings which must occur, and to provide the widest possible public accommodation to those meetings. By example, the Louisiana Legislature has implemented, for its own purposes this week, a temperature-taking requirement and a social distancing requiring

¹ “Public body” is used herein as defined by La. R.S. 42:13(3).



that in certain committee rooms only every third seat may be filled. Accommodations such as these, including distancing and sanitization, can safely preserve some public comment at meetings.

Given the current advances, there is no reason that your members cannot open up commentary to the citizens of our state via technologies that are readily available for use, many for free. In addition, your members may have capability on their websites that has never been fully utilized. The law does not limit what you can experiment with to ensure *more* public input and active participation during this crisis.

To date, every public body has been very reasonable and ensured that press access to meetings is not abridged. We want to thank you for this, because cooperation between our members is so important: people rely on the press to bring them the information from the public meetings that they cannot attend. When people are limited from attending due to COVID-19, the media's access should be a priority for you and your members.

On behalf of our members across Louisiana, we further request that you explore **all available options** for public participation in the meetings you will hold over the next days, weeks and months. Public input on the policies public bodies legislate and create is essential to our members' reporting activities and a better-informed citizenry.

We ask that you please forward this to your membership, and assure them that our thoughts are with them in these trying times, as we all attempt to minimize the harm to others and ensure the public has confidence in its government.

Very Truly Yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Scott L. Sternberg', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

SCOTT L. STERNBERG