



Massachusetts Association of Conservation Commissions

protecting wetlands, open space and biological diversity through education and advocacy

Testimony in Favor of H.3025 and S.2011

An Act relative to remote access for public bodies and town meetings.
Joint Committee on State Administration and Regulatory Oversight

July 26, 2023

Thank you, House Chair Collins, Senate Chair Cabral, and members of the Joint Committee on State Administration and Regulatory Oversight for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Dorothy McGlincy. I am the Executive Director of the Massachusetts Association of Conservation Commissions (MACC). MACC is a statewide non-profit organization that supports more than 2,500 volunteer conservation commissioners in all 351 municipalities. We work to protect and preserve wetlands and open space.

We are excited there are so many bills in front of this committee to promote remote and hybrid meetings for municipal commissions and boards! We fully support the option of hybrid meetings for municipal commissions and boards.

MACC supports **H.3025 and S.2011**. We support portions of the other bills, such as **H.3040 and S.2024**, but we do not agree with the many requirements in these last two bills because of the increased workload and financial impacts to smaller municipalities. We recognize that some of the bills before you today provide for annual waivers and funding to help with the hybrid meeting

process, but the waivers and funding come with more process and reporting requirements that add to the workload of these municipal volunteers and staff.

Here are a few points we want to make today in support of **H.3025/S.2011**.

1. Remote meetings have proven to be highly effective for many conservation commissions in the eastern part of the state, where internet signals are strong. We have seen increased public participation at hybrid and remote commission meetings in these areas. Many of these municipalities have IT staff to support hybrid meetings.
2. Most of our commissions struggle with quorum issues and in areas where the internet signal is strong, remote and hybrid meetings have allowed remote participation by commissioners, even when travelling out of the region.
3. However, MACC members in central and western Massachusetts have shared their significant concerns and dislike of running remote or hybrid commission meetings. In the western part of the state, where the internet signal strength is “spotty” and often not strong enough to conduct virtual or hybrid meetings, these commissions prefer in-person meetings. Many commissions in the western part of the state have told me they have no staff, limited equipment, and no internet experts to assist with the hybrid meetings.
4. Conservation commissions and other municipal boards will benefit from the “right to choose” in-person meetings, hybrid meetings, or virtual meetings. MACC urges flexibility and supports **H.3025/S.2011**.

Finally, a few words about **H.3040/S.2024**:

- These two bills have many worthwhile elements.
- We respectfully do not support the bills - as written - because they could negatively impact small towns in central and western Massachusetts. These towns have weak internet connections, little or no staff to implement the hybrid meetings, little or no IT support, and limited financial resources.
- While these bills allow for *Hardship Waivers* and funding through a *Municipal Hybrid Meeting Trust Fund*, the process, annual reporting, and paperwork requirements add yet another level of complexity for municipalities struggling to find volunteers for their commissions and staff for their Town Halls.
- There is too much process in these bills as written.

Finally, MACC supports the intent of **H.3914** “An Act relative to publication of notice by municipalities.”

- This bill allows several alternatives, such as a centralized, electronic, public website & database maintained by the Secretary of Massachusetts, and other alternatives for publishing legal notices, instead of requiring legal notices to be published in a newspaper.
- So many of the local newspapers have gone out of business and using larger, regional newspapers for the notices is a financial burden to our municipal commissions and boards.
- A legislative fix is needed to provide for electronic “publishing” of legal notices.

Thank you for your time and consideration of these issues.

Respectfully submitted,

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