

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

A better way to hold public meetings

Tonight the Pottstown School Board will conduct its first in-person meeting since a school board workshop in July. That's because we'll be swearing in three new board members as a result of the November election. (Three incumbents chose not to run.)

But I hope that next week, we'll go back to virtual meetings. It may seem counter-intuitive, but virtual meetings are much more clear for participants and observers, and much more accessible to the public.

Just as many people prefer watching movies at home rather than going to a crowded theater, virtual public meetings have a lot of advantages over in-person meetings.

Videoconferencing has been around for more than a decade, but its use has skyrocketed in the last two years because of the pandemic.

Various platforms like Zoom, Google Hangouts and GoToMeeting work the same way. Participants sit in front of a laptop or computer with a webcam and click on a button to see and be seen. Participants are displayed on everyone's screen in little boxes similar to the old Hollywood Squares TV program. Participants can also click on a button to speak and be heard by others, and when someone speaks, a frame lights up around his or her face.

Participants can be anywhere they have a computer, usually at home.

Likewise, citizens can observe these meetings live from their home computers or smart phones, accessing the meeting using a phone number or hyperlink posted on the borough website (for borough government meetings) or the Pottstown School District Facebook page.

Documents or Power Points used in presentations can also be displayed on the screens.

The meetings are recorded and posted on the borough/school district websites so people can watch them later.

Having either participated or observed hundreds of public meetings over the last 40 years, these advantages come to mind:

No travel is necessary. Participate from home or wherever else you happen to be. Cold or rainy outside? Not a problem. Feeling a little ill? You can still participate.

Relax

Participate from your easy chair. Get up and stretch if you need to. Take a bathroom break without disturbing others. Munch on some popcorn (quietly and discretely, of course).

You can hear better.

How many times have you missed what people say because they don't speak into their microphone?

Sitting in front of his or her computer, everyone is always speaking directly into the microphone.

Moreover, the district now close captions everything being said, so you don't miss a word.

See all the presentation materials. Nothing is more annoying than watching a meeting where people are talking about documents you can't see. In a virtual meeting, you should be able to see all of them on your screen and capture them for further study later.

Enjoy people watching. Ironically, you get a better view of the participants in a virtual meeting than a real one, because you are seeing everyone's face, close up.

And if you are observing rather than participating, you're not sitting in a crowd of people who can be distracting.

Expand access. The easier it is to watch a meeting, the better it is for local democracy. Watch it live or watch it later. It's always available.



Commentary by
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BETTER THAN NETFLIX? — Citizens can watch public meetings from the comfort of their own homes, and they can make public comments virtually.