



Watertown City Council

Administration Building
149 Main Street
Watertown, MA 02472
Phone: 617-972-6470

ELECTED OFFICIALS:

Mark S. Sideris,
Council President

Vincent J. Piccirilli, Jr.,
Vice President &
District C Councilor

John M. Airasian,
Councilor At Large

Caroline Bays,
Councilor At Large

John G. Gannon,
Councilor At Large

Anthony Palomba,
Councilor At Large

Nicole Gardner,
District A Councilor

Lisa J. Feltner,
District B Councilor

Emily Izzo,
District D Councilor

Report of the Committee on Economic Development & Planning Meeting Date: September 27, 2023

The Committee convened on Wednesday September 27, 2023 at 6:00 pm in the Philip Pane Lower Hearing Room, with remote participation by Zoom. Present were Lisa Feltner, chair; John Gannon, vice chair; and Vincent Piccirilli, secretary. Staff present were Steven Magoon, Assistant City Manager/Director of Community Development and Planning; Gideon Schreiber, Assistant Director of Planning; Antonio Mancini, Zoning Enforcement Officer; George Proakis, City Manager (by zoom). Also present were Council President Mark Sideris, and Councilors John Airasian and Emily Izzo. See Attachment A for other attendees.

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss revising requirements for Community Meetings for large projects.

Mr. Proakis spoke about the genesis of this referral, which was regarding the reuse of an existing building on Manley Way that did not meet the requirements for a Community Meeting, but did one voluntarily, noting the input from the meeting was very helpful. He noted that Somerville only added Community Meetings to its Zoning Ordinance after many years of doing them informally. He addressed the issue of Developer Conferences, noting that Somerville does not have Developer Conferences open to the public, and he is not aware of any municipality that does. He added that it does not make sense to have these open to the public, because the purpose is to have an open exchange of ideas that need refinement before moving forward, and sometimes developers do not proceed with a project after getting input from staff. He said it's important to get the right public feedback at the right time to be meaningful and effective.

Next, Mr. Magoon provided a memo about Community Meeting Requirements (Attachment B – *note the last sentence of the second paragraph of this memo contains a typo; it should read "...10,000 square feet of non-residential."*) regarding Section 9.03(b) of the Zoning Ordinance (Attachment C).

Key discussion points:

- The recommendation of DCDP is to amend the regulations to cover building conversion, not just new construction, and not change the language of the zoning ordinance.
- In the 2nd paragraph, the words "of new development" should be deleted.
- Throughout the regulations, change 10 days or 2 weeks to "10 business days".
- For item 2, include a recommended list of documents that must be provided, such as floorplans, site maps, several rendering perspectives, etc.

The Chair opened up public comments:

- George Skuse spoke about his concerns with the process. (see email, Attachment D)
- Marcy Murningham spoke about the principles of transparency and engagement in the Charter Preamble, thus item 6 should better reflect this.
- Dennis Duff spoke about the Developer Conference, and how does the public know what was decided.

- Linda Scott spoke about her concerns with the process. (see email, Attachment E)
- Rita Colafella spoke about her concerns with public meetings. (see email, Attachment F)
- Elodia Thomas spoke about her concerns including materials not being provided 2 weeks in advance, that developer meetings with staff could be open to the public for observation-only, DCDP should be doing reports of the meetings not the developer to balance perspectives, a summary sheet should be provided at each meeting with all the changes made to the plans, some people don't get to ask questions due to lack of time and Zoom meetings are inadequate, and aggregated noise from multiple projects needs to be addressed; this committee referral only came about due to residents' concerns, not staff.
- Jacky van Leeuwen spoke about negative comments don't reflect the whole community, and wonders if the threshold of 4 units is considered best practice for housing developments.
- Joan Gumbleton spoke about her concerns with the process. (see email, Attachment G)
- Jamie Gordon spoke about developers limiting participation at zoom meetings, and that all emails sent about a project should be provided to the Planning Board and ZBA.
- Sam Ghilardi spoke about not providing more meetings when it's just the same people showing up, and the need to find a better way to engage the broader public, such as renters.

- ➔ **Action item:** Councilor Piccirilli made a motion, seconded by Councilor Gannon, to recommend the City Council endorses the changes to the regulations for Community Meeting Requirements, as follows:
1. In the 2nd paragraph, the words "of new development" will be deleted.
 2. Throughout the regulations, change 10 days or 2 weeks to "10 business days".
 3. For item 2, include a recommended list of documents that must be provided.

The motion was voted 3-0.

The meeting adjourned at 8:20 pm.

Report prepared by Vincent Piccirilli

Attachments:

- A. List of other attendees
- B. DCDP memo dated September 27, 2023
- C. Section 9.03(b) of the Zoning Ordinance
- D. George Skuse email
- E. Linda Scott email
- F. Rita Colafella email
- G. Joan Gumbleton email

Attachment A – Other Attendees

* On Zoom

Elodia Thomas

Clyde Younger

Jaime Gordon

Linda Scott

Dennis Duff

Rita Colafella

Joan Gumbleton

George Skuse

Carolyn Gritter

*David Stokes

*Jacky van Leeuwen

Marcy Murningham

*Rachel Kay

*Sam Ghilardi

*Josh Rosmarin



CITY OF WATERTOWN
Department of
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149 Main Street
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To: Committee on Economic Development and Planning
From: Steve Magoon, Assistant City Manager of Community Development & Planning; Gideon Schreiber, Assistant Director of Planning
Date: September 27, 2023
Re: **Community Meeting Requirements**

At the request of the Honorable City Council DCDP staff reviewed the current community meeting requirements and identified suggested changes to expand which projects will require a community meeting and make the process more defined.

The current language within the Watertown Zoning Ordinance includes a threshold for having an initial community meeting, which is triggered for **new development** with four or more residential units or for non-residential projects of 10,000 s.f. or more ([Section 9.03\(b\)](#)). The Ordinance, under [Section Two](#), does not specifically define what new development is. In the first part of Section 9.03 there is a reference that **any project** requiring Site Plan Review (SR) or Special Permit with Site Plan Review (SP/SR) under [§ 5.01](#) Table of Use regulations shall follow all requirements within the section. Staff has reviewed the language and reference, and suggests that for the purpose of community meetings, the words, “new development” could be interpreted to also encompass “conversions” as used in the Use Table. Conversions is defined and specifically, by including conversions, the requirement would then extend to all projects that require Site Plan Review or Special Permit with Site Plan Review and have the threshold of 4 residential units and/or 10,000 square feet of non-commercial.

This option would expand the applicability and would not require a zoning amendment. It could be implemented using the existing application and handouts. Attached as Appendix A is an example of a handout provided to projects that trigger the community meeting requirement.



City of Watertown
Department of Community Development and Planning
Administration Building
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COMMUNITY MEETING REQUIREMENTS

The Watertown Zoning Ordinance, [Section 9.03\(b\)](#) requires a community meeting (referenced in the Watertown Zoning Ordinance as a public information meeting) for certain projects needing Special Permit with Site Plan Review or Site Plan Review approval. This required community meeting is intended to give a project team the opportunity to introduce initial project concept plans to the public and receive comments and questions prior to the formal application and public process before the Planning Board and/or the Zoning Board of Appeals.

For projects with **four** or greater residential units, or for non-residential projects with **10,000** square feet of new development or greater, a petitioner/applicant shall hold one Community Meeting (the DCDP Director may require a second meeting) at least **10 days prior** to the formal zoning application to the Planning Board or Zoning Board of Appeals.

The applicant must:

1. Coordinate the meeting date and location of the Community Meeting with Department of Community Development and Planning staff (DCDP) and the City Councilor who represents the district where the project is proposed;
2. Submit project materials to DCDP **two weeks** in advance of the Community Meeting;
3. Confirm the meeting time and place of the Community Meeting with DCDP staff
4. Provide notice no less than **two weeks** prior to the Community Meeting;
5. Distribute an enhanced 500' notice to property addresses and a 300' notice to property owners (a copy of the notice must be submitted and approved by DCDP before distribution);
6. City Staff will also announce the meeting by posting the Petitioner's notice on the Town website calendar and using the city email notification system;
7. Submit a written summary of the Community Meeting to the City Planning and Zoning Staff within **a week** of the meeting. The report must include comments received and answers provided at the meeting.

a Solar Energy System Assessment, as required under Section 8.05. The Petitioner shall indicate, in writing, what actions/outcomes will be taken with a copy of the assessment, to DCDP.

- (b) The Planning Board shall hold a hearing on the proposal to examine the standards set forth in subsection (c) below as part of the formal application process. Prior to said hearing, a Preliminary Developer's Conference shall be held with representatives of the developer and City Departments and Committees listed in subsection (a) above, to determine and discuss questions, impacts, potential problems, etc., with said site plan, and to provide guidance to the developers in completing the formal application and site plan submission. Each department shall submit an analysis of the formal application and site plan to the Director of DCDP within 30 days.

For projects with four or greater residential units, or for non-residential projects with 10,000 square feet of new development or greater, the Petitioner will conduct a public information meeting no less than 10 days prior to submission for Planning Board or Zoning Board of Appeals approval. The meeting will provide an opportunity for the public to understand and comment on the specifics of the project, the details of such project shall be made available to the public, through submission to the Department of Community Development & Planning, no less than 14 days prior to the public information meeting. The Petitioner shall coordinate planning this meeting with the Department of Community Development & Planning and the City Councilor who represents the district where the project would be built. The meeting shall be announced by the Petitioner no less than two weeks prior to the meeting. The required advertising by the Petitioner shall include a notice distributed to abutters and abutters to abutters within 300' of the site. Upon confirmation of the meeting time and place with the Department of Community Development and Planning, said Department will also announce the meeting by posting an announcement on the City website, with the City Council and using the City Email notification system. Within one week of the meeting, the Petitioner shall submit a summary of what was discussed at the meeting to the Department of Community Development & Planning. At the discretion of the Director of Community Development & Planning, a second public information meeting may be required in instances of large projects with a community impact, or a project with circumstances that would necessitate a second meeting.

No application shall be complete, shall be accepted by the Director of DCDP, nor be submitted to the Planning Board for consideration unless and until all information specified in § 9.03(a) is submitted in a form deemed to be sufficient and complete by the Director of DCDP, and until reports on the application are received from all relevant City Departments and Committees as defined in subsection (a) above; provided, however, that if a department fails to provide such analysis within said 15 day period, the DCDP's review shall proceed without the report of such department, and the Director of DCDP may determine such application to be complete notwithstanding the failure of such department to submit its report. Said reports shall be incorporated into the submission to the Planning Board.

- (c) The Planning Board shall review the formal application and site plan and then prepare a written report on the proposal considering, among other things, the ten criteria listed below. When a proposal requires a Variance or Special Permit with Site Plan Review in accordance with § 5.01 and the Board of Appeals is the SPGA, this report of the Planning Board shall be submitted to the Board of Appeals in accordance with the provisions set forth below. The Board of Appeals shall not grant the Special Permit or Variance until this report has been submitted. When a proposal requires a Special Permit with Site Plan

Changes to Community Meeting Requirements (for 9/27/2023)

George Skuse <george.skuse@gmail.com>

Wed 9/27/2023 6:51 AM

To: Feltner, Lisa <lfeltner@watertown-ma.gov>; Gannon, John <jgannon@watertown-ma.gov>; Piccirilli, Vincent J <vpiccirilli@watertown-ma.gov>

Cc: Sideris, Mark <msideris@watertown-ma.gov>

Councilors of the Committee on Economic Development and Planning,

As you're considering changes to the Zoning Ordinance related to **Community Meetings**, I'd like to suggest that:

- Any project requiring either a Site Plan Review or a Special Permit should be required to have a Community Meeting.

Also, I'd like to propose the following to define the expectations of Community Meetings. Some of these are modeled after other cities, while some address issues I've witnessed:

1. The applicant must provide options for people to attend the meeting in-person and virtually. The meeting can be conducted as a single hybrid meeting that allows community members to attend in person or remotely, or as separate in-person and online meetings.
2. The applicant must coordinate with Watertown's Cable Access Corp to record and broadcast all meetings (whether in-person, hybrid, or virtual).
3. Require city staff to take official minutes of the meetings and require the applicant's written summary of the meeting to describe how they've responded to issues raised.
4. DCDP should produce a set of guidelines to assist applicants in running successful Community Meetings. See Cambridge's [\(pdf\)](#) as an example: https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/CDD/ZoningDevel/PlanningBoard/pbrules2022/cddpreappeceguidelines_adopied_20221025.pdf

In some cities (Somerville for example), **Preliminary Developer Conferences** (occurring *before* a Community Meeting) are coordinated by an appointed body and subject to Open Meeting Law. In Watertown, these meetings are currently internal and private. As access to these conferences would increase transparency and allow for better preparation for Community Meetings, I'd propose that the ordinance be amended to:

1. Allow the public to attend the Preliminary Developer's Conferences (defined in [§9.03\(b\)](#)).
2. Require that the dates of upcoming Preliminary Developer's Conferences be posted.
3. Ensure that minutes for the Preliminary Developer's Conferences are recorded, retained, and published.

Finally, as last-minute submissions make it difficult for the public to provide informed comments, I'd like to suggest:

1. For any Community Meeting, or hearing by the Planning Board or Zoning Board of Appeals, all materials and presentations to be referenced by the applicant or city staff must be made available online 10 days prior to the meeting via the city's website.
2. For any presentation or proposal by the applicant (including those at a community meeting or hearing) any changes to previously presented plans or proposals should be fully annotated for the Boards and the public to easily review.

Thanks again for your time and consideration,

George Skuse, 43 Pilgrim Rd

Municipal employee; all comments are my own personal opinions and not made on behalf of another.



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Community Development Department

CDD Guidelines for Pre-Application Early Community Engagement

The Planning Board requires, in Section 5 of the Planning Board's Rules, that projects seeking a Special Permit conduct a pre-application early community engagement process including at least one community meeting hosted by the Applicant. These guidelines provide additional suggestions and ideas for making the community meeting(s) as inclusive, meaningful, and productive as possible.

Early community engagement is an important part of project review that provides opportunities for community members to learn about a potential development project prior to any formal public hearings, allows interested parties to have a dialogue about the major concerns and issues that may be associated with a project, and provides useful feedback to the Planning Board to inform the Board's future review, when required.

The extent of outreach and engagement may vary depending on the location, scale and impact of the project, as well as the communities that are being engaged. Early Community Engagement options may include:

- Meetings with established neighborhood groups (where applicable)
- Open houses
- Informative and/or interactive websites
- Distributing information through e-mail, mailings, flyers and on-site postings
- Informal conversations with interested parties.

Applicants should center equity and inclusion in their engagement by following the approach suggested in CDD's Community Engagement Handbook. The "Public Meetings" chapter in the Handbook has detailed recommendations on how to host community meetings.

1. Applicants are encouraged to schedule a meeting with CDD staff before initiating a pre-application Early Community Engagement process to identify historically excluded and underheard communities, create an appropriate list of contacts, and decide on an appropriate combination of notification methods.
2. Community meeting(s) should be accessible to all who want to attend. They should be held at a location that community members frequently go to and at a time that is convenient for most community members to attend, with both in-person and virtual options to participate. Additionally, Applicants should schedule community meeting(s) in coordination with existing neighborhood groups and community-based organizations to avoid any conflicts.



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Community Development Department

3. Community meeting(s) should be advertised by mail or e-mail no less than two weeks prior to the meeting date and should be located on-site or in close proximity to the site of a proposed project.
4. An appropriate list of community members who should be directly notified should include:
 - a) Abutters;
 - b) Nearby residents;
 - c) Community groups in the project's neighborhood and adjoining neighborhoods. (A running list of existing neighborhood and community groups is available on the CDD website: <http://www.cambridgema.gov/CDD/planud/neighborhoodorganizations.aspx>);
 - d) Community-based organizations; and
 - e) Leaders and stakeholders from historically excluded and underheard communities.
5. In addition to targeted notification, outreach methods could be expanded to inform and engage a wider range of community members who might be interested in a project. Possible methods of notification may include:
 - a) Informative and/or interactive websites;
 - b) Neighborhood and other e-mail lists;
 - c) Social media; and
 - d) Posters or signs posted on-site or at other locations frequented by community members such as places of worship, hair salons and barber shops, playgrounds, convenience stores, check-cashing sites, and laundromats.
6. Community meeting(s) can take many different formats. A typical format of community meeting(s) includes a short presentation about the proposal followed by a Q&A session and discussion session. Community meeting(s) could also include an "open house" format allowing community members to come in and out at different times to review the proposal and ask questions. Community meeting(s) are meant to provide opportunities for community members to receive information, ask questions, and provide comments in real time. The community meeting(s) can be conducted in a hybrid format that allows community members to attend in person or remotely, or as separate in-person and online meetings. When planning a virtual meeting, refer to the section "Examine Technology Access and Privilege" on page 114 of the Handbook for recommendations on an inclusive approach.



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Community Development Department

7. Throughout the pre-application community engagement process, the following information should be presented along with other information that might be relevant to the specific project. If the community engagement process has multiple phases, more general information might be presented for discussion at an earlier phase, with more detailed plans presented at a later phase.
 - a) An initial site analysis addressing site opportunities and constraints, the uses of all adjacent buildings, traffic conditions and major environmental considerations, and the zoning of the site and adjacent properties;
 - b) A drawing of existing site context indicating topography of the site and the location of structures and prominent landscape elements on or abutting the site;
 - c) Photos showing the facades of adjacent buildings, trees on the site, general streetscape character;
 - d) A three-dimensional zoning envelope study that illustrates the maximum allowable floor area and building bulk under current zoning;
 - e) A description of the Applicant's objectives with regard to the site development including tentative program mix; and
 - f) Preliminary massing studies, plan(s) and rendering(s).
 - g) Information about how to attend any relevant Planning Board hearings and provide comments to the Planning Board.
8. It is strongly recommended that presentation materials be developed using the "Plain Language Checklist" in the Handbook and made available online for community members who were unable to attend.

Tonight's Committee on Economic Development and Planning Meeting, advance notes

Linda <linda.scott3@comcast.net>

Wed 9/27/2023 11:59 AM

To: City Councilors <citycouncilors@watertown-ma.gov>

Dear Councilors Feltner, Gannon and Piccirilli,

Here is an advanced copy of what I plan to say tonight. Thank you so much for your speedy response to this critical issue!

Tonight we will be speaking about boring stuff. Process issues. Boring, and yet little by little as the door has slowly closed, the public is left more and more out of the process and in the dark.

I'm not going to ascribe any ill will involved in this, but it seems clear that one by one the building blocks of communication between the people of Watertown and their government (in this case the Department of Community Planning and Development (DCDP)), have been crumbling.

Often, the phrase that's used when something goes awry in Watertown is, "We're a city now." Those words should not lull this community into accepting poor service or inadequate communication.

Tonight it's all about process and some of the ways that that can be improved for better understanding.

As you know, a few months ago, I was curious about the process for the Planning and Zoning Boards to receive citizen input. I sent certified letters to each of the Planning Board members weeks before the meeting on the issue I was addressing would be heard by them.

I mailed these letters across the street at the Post Office. Assuming that was that, I attended that meeting, only to find that my "community input" sat there, unopened, having been delivered to the board members that evening, although these certified letters had been sitting in the DCDP office for almost three weeks.

Some of the suggestions are things that have been "lost along the way," and some are based upon my observations with accompanying solutions.

For instance, I really support returning to the system where there is a preliminary meeting. I know that the public can't speak at those meetings, but it would give Watertown residents time to really think about the project before the developer's meeting when they can speak.

The issue of when and how the Planning and Zoning Boards (and the public) get project information is critical. That spills over into the public's ability to know what's going on. For instance, I've been to multiple meetings where the developer plops down newly redesigned projects onto the Board members' table the night of the meeting that it is being discussed, leaving the Board members scrambling to catch up and the public in the dark.

That could be easily solved by giving the developers a strict deadline...they won't be on the agenda for that next meeting unless ALL information has been submitted to the Board at least 10 days before the meeting. Otherwise, they can just wait until the next meeting, when they have a completed plan to present. This has the added benefit of supporting our hardworking Planning and Zoning Board members.

These plans tend to be voluminous. If/when they are changed, it's not unreasonable for the developers to be expected to have some kind of reference sheet that draws people's attention to something new. With this, there has to be some sort of consequence for leaving some changes unmentioned.

In order to have the most community participation possible, the meetings need to provide on-site as well as zoom options and be stored and readily available for the community to watch and rewatch, if necessary. It would also be good if the members of the boards were able to at least review the meeting videos to get a better idea of what community members are saying.

A very recent communication issue is your public on-line notice for this meeting. The agenda seems to not reflect enough information to stand out to folks. I've been told that this is the result of a new IT template. Maybe this is a quick and easy one to fix?

We absolutely need community meetings for all projects that require a site plan and/or a special permit, no matter the size or amount of construction to be done. Here's an example of why this is important.

At the Manley meeting (a meeting not required by the current ordinance), a citizen pointed out a problem with the plans that would allow the Manley building to discharge storm water into Walker Pond. It was pointed out by a citizen that the quality of that water among other issues needs further clarification, and yet, in Steve Magoon's response to me on the process he mentions that:

"Based on comments [on the Manley project] received through the initial staff review, the project has now incorporated significant updated stormwater improvements and provides a substantial reduction of pavement, after the city determines that the existing loop roadway around the exterior and rear of the site was not necessary for public safety."

Without community scrutiny, this potential issue would probably not have been caught.

There are more things that can be done. I'm sure that you have received more ideas to remediate these issues via email.

Citizens and government can work in tandem to make things right. They just need transparent structures, rules and procedures that allow this to happen.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Linda Scott

Re: [PDF] Still Muted: The Limited Participatory Democracy of Zoom Public Meetings | Semantic Scholar

Rita Colafella <colafella@gmail.com>

Wed 9/27/2023 8:22 PM

To: Piccirilli, Vincent J <vpiccirilli@watertown-ma.gov>

Please attach my comments as well.

I understand the desire to align building conversion public meeting requirements with our current new construction public meeting requirements. However In practice, these meetings don't empower community members equally. Researchers at BU have found that most public meetings are unrepresentative of the larger municipality, skewing older and more likely to be a homeowner, which is a challenge for a city like Watertown, where we are split roughly 50:50 owner:renter and the average age is 38. The same 15 to 30 show up, and that's 0.08 percent of the city population. Rather than requiring more of the same unrepresentative meetings, the city should re-evaluate the necessity, purpose and goals of required community meetings. For those concerned about changing community meeting requirements or formats, there are still opportunities for public comment at both the planning board and the Zoning Board of Appeals, where large projects (like the Watertown Mall) are often continued across multiple meetings, providing ample opportunity for citizen input. I think the city is putting the cart before the horse. Tangential, I think the the thresholds should be lowered.

Rita Colafella

56 Cuba Street

On Wed, Sep 27, 2023, 7:59 PM Rita Colafella <colafella@gmail.com> wrote:

Hi.Vinnie,

Here is the BU study. Please attach to the notes.for the Department of Community Development & Planning Meeting

Thanks,
Rita

<https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Still-Muted%3A-The-Limited-Participatory-Democracy-of-Einstein-Glick/3a86193db9baf1a3c85d0475aec60bf0f7ce474b>

Still Muted: The Limited Participatory Democracy of Zoom Public Meetings

Katherine Levine Einstein^{*}

David Glick[†]

Luisa Godinez Puig[‡]

Maxwell Palmer^{§¶}

November 2, 2021

Abstract

Recent research has demonstrated that participants in public meetings are unrepresentative of their broader communities. Some suggest that reducing barriers to meeting attendance can improve participation, while others believe that such changes will be produce minimal changes. The COVID-19 pandemic shifted public meetings online, potentially reducing the time costs associated with participating. We match participants at online public meetings with administrative data to learn whether: (1) online participants are representative of their broader communities and (2) representativeness improves relative to in-person meetings. We find that participants in online forums are quite similar to those in in-person ones. They are similarly unrepresentative of residents in their broader communities and similarly overwhelmingly opposed to the construction of new housing. These results suggest important limitations to public meeting reform. Future research should continue to unpack whether reforms might prove more effective at redressing inequalities in an improved economic and public health context.

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[¶]Author names are in alphabetical order.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced municipalities across the country to implement emergency health, economic, and social policies. It also required them to adapt formerly routine functions including in-person public proceedings on important policy issues such as housing and policing. After a brief pause, municipalities moved these meetings to online platforms. Prominent politicians, activists, and media believe that this shift significantly changed the composition of participants by lowering barriers for many people. For example, in a 2021 op-ed, the *Boston Globe* called for making such changes permanent: “allowing people to participate remotely has proved to be a big improvement, broadening the pool of participants” and two Boston City Councilors introduced an ordinance that would do so.¹ Whether this optimism about online meetings’ effect on participation is justified is an empirical question with important scholarly and policy implications. In this paper, we ask whether reducing participation costs diminishes political inequality. We collect novel administrative data about participation in post-COVID-19 online housing meetings for which potential participants do not have to leave their homes. Critically, these data are directly comparable to published findings about pre-COVID-19 in-person meetings (Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019). These questions, and our answers to them, sit at the intersection of literatures about public meeting structures (e.g. Collins 2021), housing politics (e.g. Hankinson 2018), and the effect of reforms on fundamental political participation (e.g. Barber and Holbein 2020).

Making important decisions through local participatory institutions is appealing in many ways. However, recent research (e.g. Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019) has rigorously documented considerable demographic inequalities in participation in traditional public meetings and large skews in the positions that government hears through them. Recognizing such concerns, others have suggested reducing barriers and using alternative formats (including online) to improve participation (e.g. American Academy of Arts and Sciences 2020, Strategy 3). Such ideas are intuitive. Among other things, participating in-person likely means leaving one’s home for a couple of hours in the evening, traveling to a government building, and sitting through chunks of a boring meeting while waiting for deliberation on the issue

on which you would like to participate. For many, it also requires finding child care, taking time off of work, sacrificing scarce leisure time, or other serious obstacles.

While online formats present their own challenges (see below), they seemingly mitigate many of these obstacles. Thus, the COVID-19 induced shift to online meetings provides an opportunity to directly test whether online formats change participation, and to more generally evaluate whether tangible barriers are the driver behind previously observed participatory inequalities. We do this by creating and analyzing data from online meetings in the same municipalities featured in Einstein, Glick and Palmer (2019). To preview our findings, we find that participatory disparities largely persist in online forums. As in traditional meetings, participants are older, whiter, and more likely to be homeowners than voters in their broader communities. Changes in local meeting institutions alone, then, do not appear to dramatically shift the composition of participants and remedy troubling disparities in who participates.

The broader literature provides reasons to expect that reducing participatory barriers may help promote civic engagement and political participation (Norris et al. 2000). Recent studies of mail-in voting, for example, suggest that reducing the costs to participation may increase it (Barber and Holbein 2020; Thompson et al. 2020) among a more representative subset of the population (Bonica et al. 2020). The internet may similarly play an important role in facilitating political participation from underrepresented groups. Some research suggests that it can increase political engagement by supporting the recruitment of disengaged populations (Mossberger, Tolbert and McNeal 2007; Gil De Zuniga, Puig-I-Abril and Rojas 2009). Online forums reduce the costs of participation as they requires less time, physical inconvenience, and monetary costs compared to in-person meetings (Tolbert and McNeal 2003; Jung, Kim and De Zúniga 2011). Skilled internet users may be part of previously disengaged groups in offline political interactions (Krueger 2002). What’s more, online public meeting participation requires minimum levels of technical competency, which does not alienate current participants (Jung, Kim and De Zúniga 2011; Best and Krueger 2005).

Taken in concert, these studies find that making it easier to participate increases overall turnout—in some cases among underrepresented, less privileged, groups.

There is, however, also reason to doubt that changes to meeting institutions can remedy deep inequities in participation. Internet and computing access is not equally available across all communities (Anderson and Kumar 2013). Moreover, even if moving online does decrease the *costs* of participation, it does not necessarily increase *interest* or *engagement* with politics—two important drivers of participation (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). Evidence from campaigns and voting reveal that outreach efforts that do not tackle interest or engagement gaps often fall short. Enos, Fowler and Vavreck (2014), for example, show that Get-Out-the-Vote (GOTV) efforts from campaigns that do not explicitly target low-income voters can actually increase participatory disparities. Burden et al. (2019) find that same-day registration reduces participatory disparities, while early voting may, in fact, exacerbate them—a finding echoed in Berinsky (2005). Indeed, many local governments adopted public meetings around land use decisions in an effort to combat the political power of developers—a policy reform that in practice just empowered a different privileged group: older, white homeowners (Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019). What’s more, longstanding racism in housing policies (Rothstein 2017; Trounstein 2018) may lead to lower levels of trust in government—which, in turn, may depress political participation; simply changing meeting modalities cannot redress longterm distrust. In short, without increasing political interest, engagement, or trust among less privileged groups, reducing the time it takes to participate by moving online may not bring out new voices or improve representativeness.

Definitively disentangling these alternative explanations is confounded by external events: the move to online meetings coincided with a global pandemic and a growing protest movement over racial injustice. It is impossible for us to fully parse out in these longitudinal data whether shifts in participation are due exclusively to institutional changes in the meeting structure or a global change in political participation due to the political, economic, social, and public health context. Indeed, the ongoing public health and economic crises had dispro-

prtionate impacts on renters, lower-income individuals, and Black, Hispanic, and indigenous people. These effects may have dramatically reduced these groups' time and capacity to engage in any kind of political participation, including online forums. As a countervailing force, growing public interest in promoting racial justice may have spurred some of those same groups to participate more in online forums than they would have otherwise.

Even without being able to fully separate the causal effect, we believe these results offer scholars and policymakers important insights. The shift to online meetings does not appear to significantly worsen disparities—despite the digital divide. But, it also does not improve representation—even in the face of the broader political mobilization of groups traditionally underrepresented at local political meetings. Disparities are still substantial despite easy, low-cost participation and high levels of general excitement about local politics. Our evidence shows that reformers concerned about demographic disparities and skews in what government hears should not rely on online meetings as a solution. More generally, it suggests that practical barriers are not the primary source of participatory disparities and that other attempts to improve participation through logistical solutions are unlikely to make a big impact.

Housing Meetings

We focus on public planning board and zoning board meetings in 97 cities and towns in Eastern and central Massachusetts. These meetings shape the allocation of new housing units. Because of stringent land use regulations in the United States, most housing proposals involving the construction of more than one unit of housing must go through a rigorous approval process before a planning or zoning board; these meetings typically invite members of the public to participate. Previous research has shown that these participants are advantaged relative to their communities across a variety of traits. Moreover, they are overwhelmingly opposed to new housing—depressing the construction of new units, especially

in privileged places. These neighborhood meetings consequently have a profound impact on overall housing supply and access to housing in high-opportunity places (Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019).

Understanding whether online meetings change these problematic dynamics is thus of enormous substantive importance. What’s more, there are methodological advantages to focusing on these meetings. Because Einstein, Glick and Palmer (2019) studied these same communities, we are able to use their data as a benchmark against which we measure political participation in online forums. As Einstein, Glick and Palmer (2019, see for demographic profiles) explain, while these communities are geographically limited, they constitute a mixed set of people and places, including homogenous and affluent communities, diverse and deindustrializing milltowns, dense inner-core suburbs, and more outlying and rural areas. Massachusetts offers significant advantages in studying participation in public meetings: a wide swath of communities have interpreted state open meeting laws as requiring the inclusion of names and addresses of *all participants* in meeting minutes (Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019). This allows researchers to *precisely* match participants with administrative data.

We built a database of real participants who spoke virtually about proposals for more than one unit of housing between March-September 2020.² For each participant, we gathered their address and coded their views. We then matched participants’ names and addresses to a Massachusetts voter file from L2, which also matched voters to property records and estimated race using an algorithm similar to (Imai and Khanna 2016). This allows us to identify demographic characteristics of attendants (including age, race, gender, homeownership, partisanship, registration date). While we sought meeting minutes for the same 97 cities analyzed in Einstein, Glick and Palmer (2019), only 87 cities had uploaded minutes as of our data collection.³ In some cases, minutes did not report any public comments or participation. We were ultimately able to match participants to voters in 76 cities and towns.

Results

Overall, we were able to match 798 commenters making 1,078 comments to the voter file. Our main result is captured through the very simple demographic comparison in Table 1. Moving housing approval meetings online did *not* remedy systemic skews in participation. Online meeting participants were more likely to be white (13 percentage points gap), over the age of 50 (22 percentage point gap), and homeowners (25 percentage point gap) than voters in general. These differences are remarkably similar to the in-person disparities (Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019).

[Table 1]

In Table 2, we estimate models using the full voter file to assess the relationship between a variety of traits and participation simultaneously. The dependent variable is an indicator of whether the resident participated in a housing development meeting. We estimate additional models with town level controls (column 2) and town fixed effects (column 3). Consistent with the basic demographic comparisons, white residents, older residents, and homeowners are consistently and significantly more likely to participate. Unlike in the in-person context, partisanship also appears to be a strong predictor of participation in public meetings. Republicans were less likely to participate than Independents and Democrats, all else equal.

[Table 2]

What do the Boards Hear in Online Meetings?

In addition to demographic skews in who participates, Einstein, Glick and Palmer (2019) show that participants in in-person forums oppose the construction of new housing. We find that online meetings do not change this dynamic. A mere 13 percent of online participants supported the construction of new housing (compared with 14 percent of in-person meeting participants); 61 percent were opposed, and 26 percent expressed neutral views. In Figure 1, we plot the percentage of comments that were supportive of housing proposals by town.

Each circle represents a municipality, and the size of each circle corresponds to the number of comments in the data. In two communities, about half of the comments were supportive. In another five places, roughly one quarter of comments were supportive. In the rest, fewer than 20 percent were supportive, and in 14 of the 36 towns, no comments supported development.

[Figure 1]

In Table 3, we investigate which demographic groups, if any, disproportionately support or oppose proposals. Homeowners dominate both the supporters and opponents, though they skew towards opposition. Women in contrast were relatively more likely to support proposals than oppose them. Interestingly, the finding for in-person meetings was the opposite: women who participated skewed toward opposition. Logit models predicting commenters' position based on their traits. Table 4 show that, for the comments we have coded, supporters are less likely to make many comments; as in in-person meetings. Frequent commenters are significantly less likely to support the construction of new housing. We also find that, as in the descriptive data, women are more likely to make supportive comments, and homeowners are less like to do so.

[Table 3]

Notably, the vast majority of comments across all demographic groups are opposed to multifamily housing development. Figure 2 plots the percentage of comments in support of proposed developments by homeownership, race, gender, and political party. Support was low across every category, with a maximum of 21%.

[Table 4] [Figure 2]

Conclusion

Our results preliminarily show that online meetings—despite their ostensible convenience—are no panacea for eliminating participatory inequalities. While there are some modest differences, the overwhelming finding here is one of similarity between online and in-person

forums. Participation gaps remain substantial, and, in some instances, are actually larger. This is especially striking—and disconcerting—given broader societal conversations about racial injustice that coincided with the shift to online meetings. Despite growing public interest in systemic racism in local governments and protests against police brutality, Black, Hispanic, and Asian residents remained essentially unheard. More broadly, it suggests that practical reforms such as changing meeting timing or venue are unlikely to yield more equitable participation without accompanying mobilization that enhances residents’ sense of efficacy and interest in meeting proceedings.

There are some glimmers of hope, though, for those who aspire to improve local participatory disparities. Our estimates may represent the high end of inequalities in online forums. COVID-19 placed a disproportionate burden on Black and Hispanic people, and on renters. It also imposed new childcare burdens and other uncertainties on younger families. These are the same groups that are underrepresented in online and in-person participation. It may be as the global pandemic wanes, those groups will have more time and inclination to participate in online forums. More immediately, online forums are new. Many people are likely unaware of their existence, and advocacy groups are likely still developing mobilizing strategies in the physical distancing era. What’s more, many of the projects presented at these online forums were already in the pipeline, potentially making them predisposed to the same participatory disparities of the in-person era just via a new channel. Finally, the continued overrepresentation of older residents is certainly troubling from a political equity perspective; however, it offers some reassurance that differences in digital literacy are not massively preventing older residents from participating in online forums.

The limited efficacy of this structural reform does not mean that we should eschew reform in general. For example, online meetings do nothing to address the *length* of a meeting, which may be a significant dissuader for participation—especially for relatively low interest community residents. A shift to shorter meetings might have a more potent effect.

Importantly, our research just focuses on housing policy. Other policy arenas, especially

those which more naturally attract broader participation, may experience different public meeting dynamics in the Zoom era. Policing and education, for example, may be more amenable to political organization and equitable online participation. Indeed, recent research suggests important differences between public meetings in housing policy and education (Collins 2021).

New projects and new strategies both have promise to make online meetings more representative. Changing the meeting format, though, is no substitute for engagement and mobilization by the government and advocacy groups. Simply moving a three-hour zoning board meeting online will not seemingly enhance community members' sense of efficacy or interest in participation.

Notes

1. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/05/27/opinion/pandemic-taught-us-better-way-do-public-business/>
2. Even though Massachusetts imposed a temporary housing moratorium in the late spring, active discussions about housing construction at these meetings continued.
3. This 13 percent drop in meeting minute availability between 2017 and 2020 suggests potentially important capacity and transparency obstacles stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. We include information about the medium in which online meetings were conducted in our appendix.

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Author Biography

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Appendix

We summarize the ways that municipalities adapted institutional participatory procedures. Almost three-quarters (70 percent) relied on Zoom. Nearly half (47 percent) provided phone call options. A smaller number of local governments broadcast their meetings through television channels (16 percent), Facebook Live (5 percent), or the government’s website/YouTube channel (16 percent). Only 6 percent required participants to register before meetings. Figure 3 provides more details on local government online meeting procedures. Participants were able to express their concerns in different ways within these platforms. 81 percent of cities allowed commenters to speak via video conferencing or phone. More than half of the cities also allowed chat comments (58 percent) and two thirds provided an option for emailing input (66 percent).

[Figure 3]

Fw: Com. on Economic Dev. & Planning Mtg. 9/27/23 - My Comments

Joan Gumbleton <gumbletonj@aol.com>

Thu 9/28/2023 7:21 AM

To: Piccirilli, Vincent J <vpiccirilli@watertown-ma.gov>

Dear Councilor Piccirilli,

As you requested, here are the comments I made at last night's meeting regarding Community Meetings.

I am disappointed that only three changes were made to the documents and those were the ones proposed by the three Councilors and Mr. Magoon. A couple of us addressed the need that developers and the city staff coordinate that Watertown Cable news should be present to record and broadcast all Community Meetings to encourage residents to get informed and possibly participate in future meetings.

Also brought up by a few people was the idea of providing minutes of all these Community Meetings, not just published by the developer but also by involving city staff to make sure the facts are indeed factual and not missing key details and that there can be follow-up actions based on comments prior to going before the Planning Board.

I hope these issues can be raised with the appropriate city staff and get implemented so that we can get the message out that transparency is the goal in Watertown.

Regards,

Joan Gumbleton

Some excellent points were presented tonight on why we need to have Community Meetings when buildings are changing uses. With so many labs coming into Watertown, it is critical that people know where they are and what they are doing and how they may be effected and it is also good to know changes in other businesses around us.

People need to have project info available earlier in the process. Wouldn't it be beneficial for everyone so time and money aren't spent unnecessarily? There are cases when the packets aren't ready much in advance of a meeting.

Minutes of Community Meetings are important as Planning and Zoning Boards need to hear input from all who take or took the time to attend these meetings and use that input in their decision making. That way it can't be said that only input from a few people is being heard.

Some people who attend the Community Meetings feel more comfortable in a less formal setting. They may not want to speak on Zoom or at meetings in City Hall or to write letters or emails. People feed of of other people's comments.

Recordings by Watertown Cable are important also so people can view these meetings as their time allows. People have busy lives but yet want to be informed.

To have city officials or board members present at these meetings, if possible, is important so they get to interact with meeting attendees and understand their feelings and concerns early on in the process to create the best plans possible. We need to encourage more people to engage in discussions with their elected officials so they feel their opinions matter. If they can't be at a meeting, to be able to review minutes or cable tapes would be valuable.

We found out at the Manley Community Meeting, which wasn't originally planned to happen, that some people do want to be involved in the process, especially if it is in their neighborhood but also from other areas of the city. We have some highly intelligent and well educated people who can interject ideas that the DCDP staff and the rest of us don't think about. If not for the Community Meeting, there could be a lot of issues after the fact that can be addressed now.

Adding this step in the development process seems to be a no brainer if we want to move forward with smart developments that fit into our community and to make people feel valued.

As far as timing for participants speaking at meetings, many people have expressed that the two-minute rule is not long enough at the Council meetings. Many residents have suggested a five-minute rule if people feel it's necessary, but in some committee meetings that may not be long enough.

Thank you,

Joan Gumbleton
32 Falmouth Rd.