

To: Rhode Island House Committee on State Government and Elections, House Bill 5266

From: The Rhode Island Press Association

Re: H-5266. Amendment to Open Meetings Act to Allow Members of a Public Body Who Are Aged sixty five (65) years or over to participate in public meeting by telephone or electronic communication.

February 7, 2023

The Rhode Island Press Association opposes House Bill 5266 for the following reasons:

Members of public bodies should attend meetings in person to ensure they are accountable and transparent. Though remote meetings were a crucial and highly successful adaptation to keep government functioning during a global pandemic, they also fostered numerous bad habits in public bodies. We have witnessed unclear votes, garbled dialogue and clear signs of government officials engaging in other activities or being distracted while participating remotely. Though remote participation has been a useful tool, it does not lead to the highest and best behaviors for our government.

Both journalists and citizens wishing to discuss an aspect of a public meeting with a member of that body will be at a distinct disadvantage if the member is remote, either via audio only or audio/video. Though not codified in law, one of the best opportunities for citizens and journalists to interact with public officials, ask questions, share feedback and learn about the issues of the day, is in the moments following the close of a public meeting. These moments are often valued by all parties, but allowing some government officials to remain distant, removed from all personal interactions, does a disservice to the public and the media.

We worry about the possible slippery-slope of creating a special class of government official, based purely on age. We should want citizens of all ages, backgrounds and abilities to volunteer for public service, and the segregation into different classes of public servants — those required to serve in person, and those given the privilege to stay home — sets a dangerous precedent.

It should be noted that the current Open Meetings Act makes provisions for persons, regardless of their ages, who are unable for medical reasons to attend meetings in person. We wonder why persons 65 years of age and older have been singled out to be allowed to “attend” meetings electronically? Why not anyone over 60 or 55? Or 80? If this exemption is to protect older people from easily spreadable diseases, why can't they use the existing medical exemption?

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