



June 14, 2021

Representative Evan Shanley  
Chairman, House State Government and Elections Committee  
State House  
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Chairman Shanley,

Rhode Island Housing and Mortgage Finance Corporation ("RIHousing") is pleased to support the passage of House Bill 5891A, which would amend the Open Meetings Act to allow virtual meetings and public participation by electronic communication until July 1, 2023.

Early in the pandemic, Governor Raimondo signed an executive order suspending requirements in the Open Meetings Act that meetings of public bodies take place in person. The Executive Order continued to require public bodies to make those meetings accessible to the public through the use of electronic communications such as telephone or video conferences. That Executive Order remains in effect as a result of subsequent extensions.

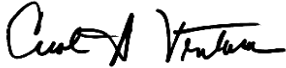
Allowing public bodies to operate remotely was adopted out of necessity to protect the health of board members and the public while allowing the essential work of these entities to continue despite the ongoing public health emergency. However, we have found that holding public meetings remotely utilizing readily available technology has not only provided public health benefits, it has also made it easier for Board members to regularly participate in meetings and facilitated public participation while providing a more complete permanent record of these meetings.

Like many other public bodies, RIHousing's Board of Commissioners shifted from in-person meetings to remote meetings when the pandemic struck. We have also held various remote public meetings associated with the requirements of the federal programs we administer. In all cases, the public has been able to fully participate in these meetings using a phone or a computer. For the public, there are many advantages to participating remotely including not having to travel to the meeting or pay for parking or potentially childcare. This is especially important for the low-income residents that many of our programs serve who may find these barriers particularly burdensome. The flexibility of being able to participate remotely is also important for public board members, many of whom are not reimbursed for their public service. Finally, a recording of these public meetings is saved, providing an even more complete record of the meeting for the public.

At some point, public bodies will again be able to safely meet in person. House Bill 5891A would ensure that, when that happens, board members and the public can continue to benefit from the flexibility provided by electronic communications. The bill would essentially build into the statute the framework instituted by the Executive Order, providing full access and transparency to the public while allowing for the use of modern communications technology to facilitate the participation of all interested parties.

We believe this legislation is a critical step to modernize the state's Open Meetings Act and continue to provide the public with the expanded opportunities for participation they have come to expect during the pandemic. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Carol Ventura  
Executive Director

cc: Nicolas Retsinas, Chairman, RIHousing