

From: Randall Rose

Subject: Opposed to H5891A

To: House Judiciary Committee

Date: June 14, 2021

I write in opposition to H5891A. This bill represents the first effort in many years to weaken Rhode Island's Open Meetings Act. It allows government bodies from the General Assembly to school boards to entirely bar members of the public from being present at their meetings, even after the pandemic is over. No doubt, many officials will take advantage of that to avoid having to meet the public when they make decisions.

When all we're allowed to do is phone in a comment from elsewhere, our voices are muffled in many ways: we can't have influence on the room by our presence and our visibility, we can't see officials' reactions or sense our fellow residents' reactions, we can't hold up items to show people, we can't have conversations during or after the meeting with the other residents who are there (and we may have no way of contacting the other people who attended).

The bill also quietly allows officials to set unnecessary sign-up deadlines for public comment, and these deadlines (which are needless) may be hours before the meeting or even on an earlier day.

In my experience of online-only meetings, even those who sign up before the deadline have often been kept from speaking, and since no one is allowed to be physically present to complain at the time, the complaints don't get heard.

The bill says that meetings will be recorded at least by audio, but the recordings may not be available till the minutes are approved, and even then may take a public-records request to access. And in addition the recordings can be deleted after less than a year.

But these details are not what is important. The main role of this bill is to isolate residents and voters from their officials and from one another, because under this bill Rhode Islanders will often be barred from being in the room when decisions are made. This severe weakening of the Open Meetings Act is wrong.

Instead, it is best to require every single meeting to be accessible both to people who attend in person and to those who connect remotely (a "hybrid meeting"), where there should be a standard that officials should normally be there in person with rare exceptions. Currently, although hybrid meetings are allowed, they are rarely done in practice. This bill doesn't help at all, and since it fails to ensure that hybrid meetings are the usual way of holding a public meeting, the public will often be reduced to phoning in short statements without being allowed to be physically present.

Sincerely,

Randall Rose