



To the R.I. House State Government and Elections Committee,

The Rhode Island Press Association, a nonprofit organization for all print news media in the state and an advocate for open government, opposes House Bill 5891 Sub A, which would allow cities and towns to hold remote meetings over the next two years.

We understood, and appreciated, the necessity of hold remote meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to keep the public at-large healthy and safe and for government to continue operating. However, the language in the proposed legislation before you concerns the association.

The largest concern the association has is the public potentially not having proper access to its respective elected officials at meetings. If this bill is passed as it is written, all public bodies would have the option to not have direct face-to-face interaction with the public during and/or after meetings; members of a public body could keep their respective cameras off, making it impossible for the public to know if their elected officials are properly following the meeting; and entire public bodies could hold meetings via telephone and avoid seeing the public.

Public bodies (city/town councils, school committees, etc.) are elected by their constituents. The constituents, and news reporters, have the right to meet with the elected officials in person to address any questions and concerns they have in a public setting. Individuals can get immediate answers in that instance. The public has a right to know what their government is doing, and it cannot be done solely through a computer screen. We feel that a hybrid model for public meetings – a mix of in-person attendance and online – should be required.

Additionally, a public body could take up to 30 business days before releasing publicly a recording of a livestreamed meeting, if this bill passes. The public having to wait a month for a public recording given the current technology that allows for immediate live broadcasts, such as YouTube, is not acceptable.

Therefore, we urge that House Bill 5891 Sub A be rejected, and the Press Association welcomes any discussion on how a compromise can be reached that could be amicable for both sides. We thank you for your time and consideration.

The Rhode Island Press Association

- James Bessette – President
- Michael McDermott – Vice President
- Linda Lotridge Levin – Secretary
- Sarah Francis - Treasurer