



AGENCY: City Council
MEETING DATE: March 14, 2022
DEPARTMENT: Administration
PRESENTED BY: David Spaur
EMAIL ADDRESS: dspaur@fortbragg.com

AGENDA ITEM SUMMARY

TITLE:

Conduct City Council Discussion and Provide Direction to Staff Regarding the Manner of Holding Public Meetings for City Council, Planning Commission and Council Committees

ISSUE:

At the City Council meeting of February 28, 2022, Mayor Norvell requested that an item be added to the March 14th City Council agenda to discuss the manner in which public meetings are to be held. As state, county and local Covid-19 regulations are rolled back in response to a decrease in new cases, Council can choose whether to hold meetings virtually, in-person, or in a hybrid combination of the two.

ANALYSIS:

Since the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, public meetings in the City of Fort Bragg have been held virtually via Zoom in response to state and county health orders to shelter-in-place, maintain social distancing, and wear masks. On March 4, 2022, Dr. Andrew Coren, the County Health Officer of Mendocino County, lifted the universal indoor mask mandate. As mask mandates and other Covid restrictions are relaxed, cities and counties are returning to in-person meetings or hybrid in-person/virtual meetings. As of September 29, 2021, the Fort Bragg Planning Commission voted not to make the state-mandated findings that would allow them to meet virtually and they have been meeting in person at Town Hall since that time. On February 23, 2022, the Planning Commission did make the required findings and adopted a resolution that will allow the Commission to meet virtually. The Commissioners requested that the City Council consider the options for moving toward a hybrid format for meetings to allow more public engagement.

The three options for City Council consideration regarding the holding of public meetings are:

- In person at Town Hall
- Virtually via Zoom
- Both in person and via Zoom (Hybrid)

Public meetings have been held in person at a public location since the City of Fort Bragg was incorporated in 1889. Virtual video-conference meetings have been held since approximately July of 2020. One clerk can handle the operational aspects of the meeting for either of these two options. The third option, hybrid meetings, requires additional staff to handle speaker permissions and run the timer for Zoom while the regular clerk of the meeting takes minutes, calls for votes, directs in-person public comments and operates the timer.

To properly conduct a hybrid meeting, the Council would need to authorize hiring a part-time IT person or allow overtime or comp time for current staff. The amount of this extra expense is unknown at this time, as meeting times vary. The fully-loaded rate for an administrative assistant in Community Development is currently \$54.52 per hour; Public Works project analyst, \$57.60; City Clerk, \$64.51.

During the pandemic, extra efforts to facilitate public engagement were made. During much of the quarantine time, five different methods of submitting public comment were allowed: (1) Using the raise hand feature of Zoom during a meeting; (2) Submitting comments using the eComment feature of Legistar, the City's agenda platform; (3) Emailing the clerk; (4) Delivering written comments to City Hall through the utility bill drop-box; and (5) Leaving a voice mail comment on a City phone message system. For many months, the clerks would read these written and voice mail comments into the record.

The eComment system, which cost approximately \$1,200 per year in 2020, was decommissioned after it was discovered that after a year's use, very few people were using it, most of whom had also submitted written comments by email and attended the meeting via Zoom to make live public comments.

On June 14, 2021, Council made a policy regarding the handling of written public comments. All written comments received after agenda publication are forwarded to Councilmembers and Planning Commissioners as soon as possible after receipt and are available for inspection at City Hall during normal business hours. All comments become a permanent part of the agenda packet on the day after the meeting or as soon as possible thereafter.

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

Staff recommends that City Council and Planning Commission meetings take place in a hybrid in-person/virtual format through the end of May 2022, when this provision would sunset and meetings would go back to in-person only.

It is recommended that all Committee meetings (Community Development, Finance and Administration, Public Safety, Public Works and Facilities, and Visit Fort Bragg) continue to be held virtually only.

ALTERNATIVE ACTION(S):

City Council can provide other directions to staff.

FISCAL IMPACT:

The City pays \$55/month for the Zoom webinar subscription. The cost of extra personnel to handle hybrid meetings on an annual basis is to be determined.

GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS IMPACT:

Some greenhouse gas emissions may be reduced if people can attend public meetings via Zoom and not have to drive downtown to the meeting. Institution of a policy regarding public meetings in itself will not affect GHG emissions.

CONSISTENCY:

Any policies regarding public meetings would have to be consistent with the Brown Act.

IMPLEMENTATION/TIMEFRAMES

Any Council direction regarding in-person or virtual meetings be implemented at the next public meeting. Directions regarding hybrid meetings on a long-term basis would require hiring staff, which can take several months.

ATTACHMENTS:

None.

NOTIFICATION:

None.