



June 9, 2022

Re: Virtual Participation Policy and Accessibility

To: Mayor and Members of City Council:

This letter is written on behalf of the Columbia Disabilities Commission and is in regards to virtual participation in board and commission meetings. This letter is within the Commission's purpose to consider the concerns of residents with disabilities and advise City Council as necessary.

In November 2021, City Council passed City Ordinance 024848. This ordinance authorized the Disabilities Commission to allow virtual participation at its regular meetings for a period of 6 months.

Disabilities Commission: 12 total members, 7 members is a quorum

Member Attendance for Disabilities Commission During Trial Program:

December 2021:	9 in-person, 3 virtual
January 2022:	6 in-person, 4 virtual
February 2022:	6 in-person, 4 virtual
March 2022:	3 in-person, 6 virtual
April 2022:	8 in-person, 2 virtual
May 2022:	8 in-person, 2 virtual

Without virtual participation, the Commission would not have had a quorum for 3 of the 6 meetings during the trial program.

Public Attendance for Disabilities Commission during Trial Program:

December 2021:	Yes in-person, 0 virtual
January 2022:	No in-person, 0 virtual
February 2022:	No in-person, 0 virtual
March 2022:	Yes in-person, 0 virtual
April 2022:	Yes in-person, 0 virtual
May 2022:	No in-person, 0 virtual

The agenda for all 6 meetings included language notifying the public that virtual participation was available and how to request it. No members of the public appeared virtually. Additional time for this trial program may lead to additional virtual attendance when the public becomes more familiar with it.



Commission's Request to Expand Virtual Attendance and Participation:

The Disabilities Commission was excited to finally get this 6 month trial program authorized and we feel the program has been successful in its goal to improve accessibility to government services for the community, in particular for people who are unable to participate in-person due to hardships related to disability.

At its meeting on May 12, 2022, the Commission discussed its desire to progressively expand virtual attendance and participation and passed the following motions:

Step 1: Commission to request City Council extend the virtual meeting trial program for those boards and commissions authorized to participate in it. (Motion Passed Unanimously).

Step 2: Commission to request City Council to authorize all boards and commissions permit virtual attendance* for its meetings. (Motion Passed Unanimously).

Step 3: Commission to request City Council to direct staff to develop and implement a city-wide virtual participation program for all boards and commissions, including City Council. (Motion Passed Unanimously).

*In this instance, the Commission distinguishes virtual attendance (observing the meeting remotely, but no participation or comments) from virtual participation (members still counted towards quorum, voting, making comments on topics).

Comments from Commission Members on Virtual Participation:

By making virtual attendance and participation a reality for Columbia's boards and commissions, the city will greatly increase diversity, inclusivity, and equity. During a pilot project, the Disabilities Commission was granted leave to allow virtual participation during a number of its meetings, regularly making it possible for members to attend, who would otherwise not have been able. According to the CDC, over 25% of people in the United States have a disability. This marginalized population includes many persons who cannot drive, who cannot walk to meetings during inclement weather, and some, who cannot even leave their homes. The Covid pandemic, in which we now live, has made leaving one's home an even greater impediment for persons whose disability includes a compromised immune system. These Columbia citizens deserve to have a voice in how their city serves its residents, and it is critical for them to have that voice if we are to have diverse representation on our boards and commissions. By implementing virtual participation, Columbia can make this happen.



“Disability Impacts All of Us.” CDC. [https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html#:~:text=26%20percent%20\(one%20in%204,is%20highest%20in%20the%20South](https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html#:~:text=26%20percent%20(one%20in%204,is%20highest%20in%20the%20South).

- Gretchen Maune, member

I am proud to serve on Columbia’s Disability Commission; however, I might have been forced to resign without ‘virtual participation’. Beginning April 2021 through March 2022 I was bedridden and unable to attend in person. The virtual participation trial period enabled me to remain active on the Commission. While I prefer to be in-person, it was good to have the virtual option during this period.

- John Bowders, member

The Commission is unanimously in favor of expanding virtual participation to improve access and eager to work with City Council to develop more permanent long-term plans to maintain accessibility for all persons. We appreciate this opportunity to comment.