

# VLCT Remote Only Public Informational Hearing Software & Technical Guidance for Vermont Municipalities

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This guidance document is intended to help those municipalities seeking to conduct their public informational hearings solely by electronic means, while also complying with the Open Meeting Law. The informational hearing must be held within the 10 days immediately preceding the town meeting at which the Australian ballot system of voting is to be used. Unlike town meeting, which is a meeting of the voters, an informational hearing is a meeting of a public body (i.e., the selectboard). Consequently, it must comply with the requirements of the Open Meeting Law. This document reviews remote meeting software options as well as technical best practices in the context of Open Meeting Law requirements. Use this guidance in conjunction with our other [Open Meeting Law](#) resources and be sure to check the website for our most current information.

## Remote Only Public Informational Hearing Software Options and Considerations

The law does not specify using a particular type of software service or conference call system to use for a remote hearing, other than to say that it may be conducted through electronic or other means and must be accessible by telephone.

There are several free and low-cost digital meeting software options available. Vendors may provide both free and tiered software options. Be aware, some of the free options may include limits on participation, access to features, duration of meeting, and/or number of internal users. Please review selection considerations below to help you assess which option may work best with your municipality's infrastructure.

To ensure you are using your remote meeting software or a teleconferencing system within the confines of the Open Meeting Law requirements, please review VLCT's regularly updated [Open Meeting Law FAQs](#) for more information.

## Selection Considerations

Here are some important considerations to keep in mind when selecting remote meeting software. Consult with your IT (Information Technology) staff or IT service provider prior to installing new software.

- Check your internet bandwidth to understand which software options are most compatible. In other words, make sure your internet speed is fast enough. If you are not sure whether your internet can support remote hearings or you need additional network assistance, contact your internet service provider to review your current plan and options.

- Review software application security settings, vulnerabilities, and options. Consult your IT staff if available. Follow the remote meeting software’s instructions.
- Strive to ensure that it allows remote participation, such as connecting through computer or device video and audio. If feasible, the software should allow the public to call-in by telephone or a simultaneous conference call option may be offered. If not, then the selectboard must provide the public access to the hearing by telephone by some other means.
- You need to be able to manage public comments, so if you’re using software with a chat system, make sure the software allows you to mute/unmute attendees and moderate any chat function.
- Make sure your software provides enough digital “room” for attendees, particularly when high attendance is anticipated (e.g. some services allow for up to 100 attendees in the free version – though there may be other limitations). Most have affordable pricing tiers, depending on your meeting needs.
- Ensure there are options for others to join the hearing without having to register or you can set an instant registration option.
- Many software services have remote platforms which allow for internal business collaboration as well, making them valuable tools not only for your remote hearing but for use by all municipal departments.
- If desired, choose remote meeting software that gives you the option to record the meeting. Act 1 is the temporary law that allows municipalities to hold their 2023 and/or 2024 town meeting public informational hearings remotely; it requires the hearings to be recorded unless unusual circumstances make it impossible for them to do so. Keep in mind that any recording will constitute a public record under Vermont’s Public Records Act and will have to be managed accordingly. Please contact the State of Vermont Archives and Records Administration (VSARA) at 802-828-3897 for records management related assistance.

## Software Providers Options

Below is a non-exhaustive list of software meeting service providers along with links to industry vetted resources where you can read reviews and recommendations about them. **VLCT does not endorse any of these services.** Please use due diligence regarding security and system compatibility when selecting a provider or providers. Be sure to comprehensively assess your municipality’s internal and external needs (including the needs of both the public body and the public participating remotely). As noted, your IT staff or provider should be consulted before downloading and launching new software.

### Common Providers:

- Freeconferencecall.com
- Zoom
- GoToMeeting/GoToWebinar
- WebEx
- ClickMeeting
- RingCentral
- Tele Town Hall,
- UberConference
- Skype for Business
- Skype (standard)
- Google Hangouts
- Vast Conference

### Audio Only Conference Services

Audio conference services may also be available through your phone or other telecommunications provider.

### External References

<https://www.techradar.com/best/best-video-conferencing-software>

<https://www.pcmag.com/picks/the-best-video-conferencing-software>

### Cybersecurity

You should be cautious when setting up your remote hearing with some software providers. **Some of these services may have known software security vulnerabilities. Vet services carefully and contact your IT provider!**

To mitigate some vulnerabilities, some software services provide unique links or passwords for users to login, which requires a registration feature or the ability to direct email contacts. Your administrator or IT provider may need to adjust service settings and compatibility features to enhance security features.

### Software Testing and Troubleshooting

Software services should be tested with your equipment prior to use. Please review provider tutorials and information sheets prior to set up. Many of these software systems allow you to designate organizers, presenters and attendees. A few of them may offer quick registration or options to embed live links via website, social media, and email.

### Setting Up a Remote Public Informational Hearing

Please review our Remote Only Public Informational Hearing Toolkit page for resources on conducting a remote only public informational hearing. The toolkit includes a remote only public informational hearing checklist, model notice and agenda, and remote only hearing script.