



Pennsylvania Municipal League
President – Derek Green, Councilmember, City of Philadelphia



Pennsylvania State Association of Township Commissioners
President – Nathan Silcox, Commissioner, Hampden Township

**Testimony Before a Joint Hearing of the
House and Senate Local Government Committees
Positives Experienced by Local Governments During The COVID Pandemic
September 13, 2021**

Good Morning, I am Amy Sturges, Director of Governmental Affairs for the PA Municipal League and the PA State Association of Township Commissioners. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

The PA Municipal League (The League) and the PA State Association of Township Commissioners (PSATC) are non-profit, non-partisan organizations collectively representing 180 urban and suburban member municipalities – cities, boroughs and townships. Over four million Pennsylvanians live within our member communities. Together, the associations aim to strengthen, empower and advocate for effective local government at the grassroots, state and federal levels.

As with every other entity, local government operations had to turn on a dime in March of 2020 to meet the pandemic head on. Keeping employees, elected officials and residents safe became a priority, but at the same time a continuity of services and operations was not only necessary, but expected by residents and businesses. Nineteen months later, local governments continue to meet the challenges of the pandemic while serving their constituents. Some positives that have come out of this experience include:

Remote Meetings

The number one take away from this experience is the success of remote meetings, which worked for local government officials and their residents; and the flexibility they afforded should continue.

Remote meetings allowed elected officials, staff and the public to interact and conduct business outside of the traditional public meeting room. Our members reported a significant increase in public attendance and participation with the very necessary shift to remote meetings. They also reported that participation has waned since the termination of the emergency declaration and the return to in person meetings.

I have had many inquiries and comments from our members about the possibility of making remote meetings a permanent option for local governments. Therefore, we request that the House and Senate Local Government Committees work with us to authorize remote meetings in the coming weeks. By simply amending the Third Class City, Borough and First Class Township Codes to remove the physical quorum requirement, municipalities will have the flexibility to utilize remote meetings as needed. Municipalities can then develop and adopt remote meeting policies outlining how and when they plan to use this flexible tool.

We are asking for quick action to eliminate the physical quorum requirement because the resurgence in COVID cases in recent weeks is causing great concern. Municipal officials are questioning the safety of holding in person meetings during this surge. They are also concerned about losing volunteers of various boards and commissions who do not want to risk their personal health attending in person meetings during times of high transmission.

Again, we ask the committees to work with us to eliminate the physical quorum requirement in the municipal codes as session resumes next week.

Innovations by Necessity

In general, the pandemic has accelerated local governments' need to be innovative in solving problems and enhancing the integration of technology to the benefit of both internal operations and constituent services.

For example, while some municipalities were live-streaming meetings pre-pandemic and uploading recordings to YouTube for future viewing, the public participation aspect was not available. The popularity of remote meetings has incentivized communities to make investments in technology and in their meeting rooms so that the public can regularly participate remotely. Recorded and remote meetings expanded beyond the meetings of the governing bodies to include municipal boards and commissions, as well.

The pandemic also forced municipalities to look at new ways to provide services. Some of the new realities that are forcing these changes include: vacancies and other staffing issues; program and service cuts; the ongoing need to integrate and adjust public health measures for the safety of employees and residents; and operating with less revenue. These challenges are prompting municipalities to think outside the box to discover and implement new ways to provide services and engage the public.

As an example, access to municipal administration no longer has to be limited to the 9 to 5 workday. Online services allow residents to communicate electronically with their government through apps and other platforms 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Residents can pay bills, report issues, apply for permits, register and pay for recreation programs when it is convenient for them and without entering the municipal building.

Community engagement is also changing. Utilizing technology to engage citizens reaches more people on their schedules. Public input and public discussions can take place over several weeks, rather than at one evening meeting. This opens the door to receiving a much larger sample of community input and is much more inclusive of all residents in a community.

Some of these advances were taking hold before COVID, but necessity has pushed all local governments to be creative and innovative. These advances will better serve residents well beyond the pandemic. Local governments are great innovators leading by example and developing best practices that can be shared. Going forward, our Commonwealth's public policy should support and promote the continued modernization of municipal operations.

Federal Investment in All Communities

The federal investment in all 19,000 communities across the nation prompted by the negative economic impacts of the pandemic is once in a lifetime. The recognition by the federal government that the pandemic will have long-lasting economic and social impacts on communities is fundamental to recovery at all levels. This funding provides local governments with the ability to replace current revenue losses, grant money to hard-hit businesses, enhance public health strategies, make investments in communities that were disproportionately impacted and make investments in water, sewer and storm water infrastructure. Our members are thankful for this investment.

The impacts of the pandemic – good and bad – will certainly be experienced for the foreseeable future. Pennsylvania's local governments have met many challenges since March of 2020 and The League and PSATC have worked from day one to be of assistance in navigating this uncharted territory.

Thank you for your time and attention. I am happy to answer any questions you may have today or in the future.