

## OPINION

# Jason Sperling: Phone-in public hearings fall short of goal of greater participation

By **JASON SPERLING** |

June 28, 2018 at 1:21 p.m.

---

At (the June 5) City Council public hearing, the city of Boulder tested a new idea for remote participation — a caller was patched into chambers to provide their public comments via the in-house audio system. (Listen to the call from 6:46 p.m. via a video recording of the meeting at <https://bit.ly/2l2vrdT>).

Councilwoman Jill Adler Grano’s laudable intent for the remote open comment pilot run is to “extend engagement” and increase “participation from a wider audience.”

It is great to see local government making strides in modernizing public hearings; technology has transformed many other communication mediums and it’s only a matter of time before public hearings evolve. But are phone-in comments a step in the right direction or a misguided effort?

In Colorado, Sunshine Laws control public hearings (here’s a guide: <https://bit.ly/2JKgTO9>). All states have some version of this, which ensures that meetings are not held in secret, but instead held open for public participation. Unfortunately, just because the doors are open for a meeting it doesn’t mean that people can make it. As highlighted by Grano, specific communities often can’t make these public meetings, including “families with children, senior citizens and business owners.”

---



However, remote participation during a public hearing suffers from a number of fatal flaws:

The volume of comments that can be heard by City Council is capped by the duration of the meeting. Boulder, in particular, has struggled with managing an overwhelming amount of feedback and last year capped the number of speakers to 15.

Citizens must be available during the public hearing. If the agenda schedule is not followed exactly, or if the citizen wants to avoid missing their slot, the citizen may end up spending significant amount of time in queue to provide their comment for specific cases.

Not all cities have pricey audio or video call technology in place in public hearing chambers, which would require an upfront capital investment of both time and money.

What's an alternative?

If both the constraint of place as well as time are eliminated, many possibilities open. "Making it" to the meeting becomes far easier. The city of Lakewood holds their public hearings online as well as in-person, allowing citizens to watch presentations, ask questions, and comment on cases via a website two weeks prior to the public hearing in chambers.

Compared to the flaws of remote participation during a public hearing:

There are no caps on public participation and because written text is read faster than listening to speakers, there is efficiency in processing comments by decision-makers.

The cost for citizens is dramatically reduced, they don't have to sit through a whole meeting to wait for their "slot" and they also can review the information faster online rather than hear it in person.

There is no new technology required by cities to install or learn how to use.

### **Phone-in vs. video calls**

The city of Boulder pursued phone-in rather than video calls because "audio is more inclusive," according to city engagement manager Sarah Huntley. However, the number of people who can actually comment at the hearing hasn't been



In the current implementation, phone-in calls still seem very limited. It might be interesting to experiment with allowing citizens to phone-in a comment that is recorded and then translated into text and posted online for City Council to review. The review time will be reduced since they'd be reading, and the calls could be accepted weeks in advance of the public hearing, truly making a more inclusive process to those who can't make the meeting, whether in person or remotely

*Jason Sperling is a resident of Boulder.*



**Jason**

**Sperling**

**Brought to you by Prairie Mountain Publishing**

**Natural Stone Look On A Budget**

You can refinish your bathroom or kitchen for less than you think! Get the natural stone look on a budget...

**Find That Special Bottle Of Wine**

You can always find that special bottle of wine at Wyatt's Wet Goods—the perfect choice to complement a special dinner...

**Affordable Cremation and Funeral Services**

Viegut Funeral Home in Loveland provides affordable cremation and funeral services to Northern Colorado families, who appreciate Viegut's reputation for...

**Contemporary Apartments For Rent In Longmont**

Is it time for a new address? Take a look at The Shores at



