



July 20, 2022

Hon. Representative Danielle Gregoire
Hon. Representative Carlos Gonzalez
Hon. Representative David Vieira

Hon. Senator William Brownsberger
Hon. Senator Nick Collins
Hon. Senator Ryan Fattman

Re: \$20 million in General Bond Bill for Municipal IT Infrastructure

Dear Members of the General Governmental Infrastructure Bond Bill Conference Committee:

Our organizations came together during the COVID pandemic when we saw how, for the first time ever, many people who had previously been excluded from participation in local government because they could not attend meetings in person were suddenly able to engage via remote means in conversations that directly impacted their lives. Across the Commonwealth, remote access to public meetings has significantly increased public participation in state and local government, and has lowered long standing barriers for people with disabilities, people with limited access to transportation, and people with work and family obligations.

We believe it's time to adopt permanent reforms to enable members of the public to attend Open Meetings either in person or remotely, which means that our municipalities will need support to make such hybrid systems permanent. That's why we're so appreciative that the **Senate recently established a new line item (1100-2517) that allocates \$20M in the general bond bill to support municipal IT infrastructure for public meetings.** As you begin to consolidate the House and Senate versions of *An Act Financing the General Governmental Infrastructure of the Commonwealth*, we respectfully ask that you include the Senate's \$20 million line item (1100-2517) in the final bill.

As you know, during the COVID-19 State of Emergency, municipalities learned to conduct meetings remotely, and new technological access significantly increased public participation in local government meetings, especially for people with disabilities, home-bound elders, parents without babysitters, rural residents, and family caregivers.

As the Commonwealth moves forward, many municipalities want to make the most of this new civic engagement, continue to protect public health, and simultaneously improve both access and equity, by combining traditional in-person meetings with tech-supported remote participation. Cities and towns need financial and technical assistance to be able to provide this important kind of access. To that end, the \$20 million line item in the Senate's version of the bond bill will improve the technological capacity of our cities and towns to conduct accessible public meetings — by enabling residents to join a meeting and contribute to the proceedings both in person and remotely.

The COVID pandemic has demonstrated that public bodies need to adapt to ensure that all residents can safely and fully access and participate in public meetings. Such adaptation has been — and will continue to be — essential to protect public health and enable people to provide input on the important decisions local bodies make that deeply affect their lives and the lives of their families. When remote access became a necessity in response to the pandemic, it did not merely preserve public bodies' ability to operate; it also opened the door to civic engagement for many groups of people who had previously been shut out. While we are hopeful that the legislature will work quickly to make these expansions permanent, the timing couldn't be better for such financial support.

We respectfully ask that you include the Senate's \$20 million line item (1100-2517) to support public meeting IT for municipalities in the final version of *An Act Financing the General Governmental Infrastructure of the Commonwealth*.

Sincerely,

ACLU of Massachusetts

Boston Center for Independent Living

Common Cause Massachusetts

Disability Law Center

League of Women Voters of Massachusetts

Massachusetts Newspaper Publishers Association

Metropolitan Area Planning Council

MASSPIRG

New England First Amendment Coalition