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Madison City Council votes to remain meeting virtually despite mayor's pushback

By Allison Garfield

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With renewed COVID-19 concerns, Madison City Council voted to remain meeting virtually despite Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway's argument that it's "detrimental" to the council.

AMBER ARNOLD

With renewed COVID-19 concerns, Madison's City Council voted to continue to meet virtually through late May in a 13-6 vote Tuesday night.

The original motion proposed that the council meet virtually through Feb. 1, 2022, and then switch to in-person from Feb. 22 to May 24, but it was shot down by Ald. Grant Foster, District 15.

"I think we're all aware of the resurgence of COVID in our community. I don't think this is a good time to transition back," Foster said, after substituting all meetings as virtual through May.

Along with concerns about COVID-19 continuing to travel through the community and the new Omicron variant, Foster said it's important the council comprehensively address the question of public participation.

"It would be a big loss to the public to lose their opportunity to participate virtually," he said, "and I think we need to have a really clear plan for that before transitioning back."

The ordinance allows the council to change any meetings to a virtual format at any meeting, but the body would need two meetings-notice to change a meeting to an in-person format, city attorney Michael Haas clarified.

“The only permanent decision you would be making tonight is what to do with the meetings in January. All meetings subsequent to that can be revisited at future meetings,” Haas said.

While several alders and public commenter Bob Schaffer agreed that a hybrid format is the best path forward, a city tech facilitator said that likely won’t be an available option for the first couple of months of January due to room renovations in the City-County Building.

“That’s the end goal here, (hybrid meetings),” he said. “The Room 201 remodel is supposed to be done by January but as far as gearing up for hybrid, I don’t believe that’s in the cards at least for the first couple of months of 2022.”

Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway contended that having virtual meetings for this long — the council has been meeting online since March 2020 — has been “incredibly detrimental” to the functioning of the council.

“It was absolutely necessary when we started it but I think that this format has outlived its usefulness at this point in time,” Rhodes-Conway said. “This virus is not going anywhere and the sad fact is that every single one of us has to figure out how to live with the virus for the rest of our lives. It’s time to start figuring out what that means and how we function on not just a short-term emergency basis, but on a long-term living-with-the-virus basis.”

As for the issue of accessibility, Rhodes-Conway said the council needs to continue to work toward a hybrid meeting model, not just for council and committee meetings, but “the issues that we wrestle with in many ways, that doesn't just involve three minutes speaking at a meeting,” she said.

“The issue of public outreach and engagement is much, much broader than just coming to speak at a council meeting,” Rhodes-Conway said. “It's one we've been working on for many years and I trust we'll continue to work on that not for years to come, because hopefully we can move faster than that.”

However, only six alders — Council President Syed Abbas, Ald. Barbara Harrington-McKinney, Ald. Charles Myadze, Ald. Regina Vidaver, Ald. Nasra Wehelie and Ald. Sheri Carter — voted against the motion to set all meetings as virtual for the time being, while 13 supported it.

Rhodes-Conway called it a missed opportunity to not come back to in-person meetings, at least partially. But Foster said it's the safest way forward.

“We will be living with this virus for some time but less than two weeks ago we heard news about a dangerous variant. We don't know what we're dealing with yet,” he said. “The default should be safety and the most safe (option) is maintaining this virtual platform.”

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