

Virtual Neighborhood Meeting Might Provide Glimpse Into Future Business Practices



By [Jason Morris](#) and [Adam Baugh](#)

COVID-19 has altered all of our businesses and daily lives. Because of this impact, it's vital to stay nimble and adaptive when considering new norms – and look for opportunities to improve your business practices.

One prime example is our approach to conducting neighborhood meetings. Our firm, [Withey Morris PLC](#), a land use and zoning law firm, recently held a virtual meeting with neighbors to discuss a proposed luxury multi-family project. Typically, a neighborhood meeting would involve inviting nearby residents to a local church or school to address any concerns about the project. In this instance, we instead sent nearby residents a GoToMeeting link and they took part in the meeting without leaving their homes. During the meeting, we introduced ourselves, showed exhibits on their screens and answered questions from neighbors via the chat section.

It turns out this approach not only allowed our project to proceed at a time we would otherwise be stymied, but it actually increased our usual attendance. Instead of asking folks to leave their home after a day of work, we were merely asking them to log on. In addition, the participation value of the attendees improved dramatically. People normally reluctant to participate in group settings seemed more likely to take

part online. On the other hand, the format also appeared to moderate the tone of others who might otherwise act contentiously.

Toward the end of the meeting, the amount of positive feedback we received about the virtual meeting amazed us. Neighbors and the city planner thanked us for the opportunity and complimented the process.

This demonstrated business can continue despite our current challenges and we are adapting to ensure cases move forward. This requires not just waiting for cities to adopt solutions, but instead helping them create them.

A good illustration of this is document and plan submittals. We are working with most of the valley jurisdictions, which are trying diligently to be responsive, to develop best practices to submit projects online. Our preferred tool of late is the file hosting service Dropbox: It has become an important tool for delivering documents to cities. (Although having a city planner's personal cell phone number has never been more important!) Ultimately, all this adaptation may mean more cities might become more proficient online and help cases move forward even faster.

As expected, we will all occasionally encounter technical glitches. Calls into city offices sometimes drop or systems don't include enough capacity for everyone to join a meeting by phone. This poses challenges when complex cases require explanation. Some meetings are simply cancelled. Every situation is a learning exercise.

Despite all of these "work-arounds" nothing will completely replace face-to-face interaction. A recent virtual public hearing illustrated the importance of seeing someone's body language. When a project is at stake, looking the mayor and council in the eye is irreplaceable – but we are rapidly adjusting to the high-resolution version, and managed to

receive our first on-line project approval.

Also, it is easy to feel lost with so many moving parts in a virtual meeting. You are forced to balance exhibits, phone lines, your laptop and communication with a project team that may be in six different locations. However, virtual meetings in the future could supplement the ways we currently do business. The virtual neighborhood meeting allowed us to avoid significant travel time, leading to a significant cost savings, including the cost of the room rental.

For us, the work goes on, although lately we might perform some of it in sweats.

Jason Morris is a founding partner of [Withey Morris PLC](#). Throughout his career, he's practiced exclusively in land use, government relations, zoning and administrative law. He's provided critical expertise to state legislative efforts surrounding land use over the past two decades and his cases include many of the area's most significant and notable developments.

Adam Baugh is a partner at [Withey Morris, PLC](#) where he has been practicing land use and zoning law since 2007. He works with city councils, planning commissions, and neighborhood groups in representing landowners, developers and businesses in obtaining land use entitlements.