

# minuteTakers

## Virtual Meetings – the New Normal?

*By Scarlett Guy: Published August 2020*

We at MinuteTakers Inc. have attended hundreds of thousands of virtual meetings over the past many years, mostly for corporate entities and professional associations. Up to now, the condominium community has been slow to embrace this technology, but after some early resistance, the COVID-19 pandemic initially made virtual meetings the only way for condominium Boards to continue conducting the business of their corporations.

We have found that many of our condominium clients are now realizing the many benefits of holding their meetings virtually. A web or phone-based meeting format increases the availability of all involved and thus makes scheduling easier. Further, participants are more likely to review the materials that are sent electronically in advance, and our experience has shown that meetings held via electronic means are significantly shorter in length and are much more efficiently run.

### Benefits of Virtual meetings

The benefits of virtual meetings are numerous. To name a few:

- **Efficient:** Participants are obliged to speak one at a time, which allows the meeting to proceed in an orderly fashion. From our experience, most meetings are concluded much more quickly.
- **Productive:** Participants review the meeting materials in advance and at the meeting, the focus is on the issue at hand without distraction. This facilitates a good decision.
- **Quorum:** Virtual Board and Committee meetings nearly always achieve 100% attendance as geography; travel time and many other factors are no longer an issue. Non-resident owners are particularly grateful they can join in at their Annual General Meeting without physically traveling to the site.
- **Health:** There is no transmission of colds, flu and other communicable diseases.
- **Safety:** A virtual meeting reduces the potential for traffic accidents caused by inclement weather or other road conditions, or trip and falls on corporation property.
- **Flexible:** A virtual format allows for increased availability and enhanced flexibility in timing of the meeting. For most participants, there is often no need to wait until returning from work or after dinner to hold the meeting, and weather or sneeze/ sniffles would no longer be a barrier. More meetings are being held during the day so that managers can get home to their families at a reasonable hour. From the minute-taking perspective, a recording secretary can possibly cover more meetings consecutively on busy days when multiple groups want to meet on the same day.
- **Screen Sharing:** For meetings held via videoconference, draft budgets, last-minute quotes and other documents not sent in advance can be shared so all can see. Alternatively, such documents can be quickly sent via email to audio-only attendees.

- **Cost-effective:** A virtual meeting often saves on expenses such as refreshments and overtime costs.
- **Protective:** Residents may not be comfortable having a non-resident admitted to the building and travelling through the common areas, using the elevator, etc. It should be kept in mind that a recording secretary could potentially attend up to 20 meetings per month, and if attending in-person, that translates into a significant amount of contact exposure. A virtual meeting format completely eliminates this issue.

### **Minute-taking at Virtual Meetings**

From the recording secretary's perspective, there is no appreciable difference in taking minutes at a virtual meeting as opposed to attending live in person. In all honesty, it actually makes our job easier, as the virtual platforms typically only allow one person to speak at a time, and from our experience, most participants have done their homework in advance so that decisions can be made in an efficient manner. Virtual meetings are generally more organized and participants are better prepared.

Although it takes more time by the recording secretary prior to the meeting's commencement to review the meeting materials in advance and to prepare a rough outline, ultimately a remote meeting is more efficient in terms of time management, reduced travel, and zero exposure to sneezes, sniffles and other illnesses. Further, recording secretaries are no longer limited in terms of their geographical location; they can attend a meeting from wherever they are. We have had our minute-takers cover meetings from locations in Northern Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia and even London, England! This allows for enhanced continuity and a site's favoured recording secretary is more likely to be available when required.

### **Tips for a Successful Virtual Meeting**

Here are some tips to help remote meetings run smoothly through either a video or audio conference call.

- Prior to the meeting, the Manager should email the Board and minute-taking company a copy of the full meeting package, such as the Agenda, Management Report and attachments, and encourage participants to read through the material before the meeting. This will help all meeting participants follow the meeting.
- The Chair should take "attendance" at the beginning of the meeting, with each Member to state their name so the recording secretary can accurately capture who attended the meeting.
- The Recording Secretary will introduce him/herself at the beginning of the meeting and then mute their line to reduce background noise.
- The Chair should begin the meeting and advise the participants of the "rules" of the meeting:
  - Reduce distractions (children/pets).
  - Have a simple background behind you if using videoconference.
  - When Motions are made, state the name of the Motioner and Seconder, and confirm whether the vote passed.
  - When an action item is given, state who is responsible to carry out the directive.
  - Try to avoid speaking over each other.
  - Be respectful of your fellow Directors and allow them to speak in turn.
- The Chair may then invite the Manager to review their report one item at a time; pausing after each item to clarify any consent, decision or follow-up direction.

## Best Practices

At the time of writing this article, we have seen a rush by some condominium sites to return to in-person meetings. We are puzzled as to why. Is such a risk worth taking? Is this socially responsible? In terms of the safety of your residents, directors, and other meeting participants such as property manager, recording secretary, and industry professionals that would ordinarily be travelling from various areas of the city, do you want them bringing whatever they may have been exposed to, into your condominium? Is the old way of doing things so much better than the new way of holding meetings?

In accordance with current workplace legislation, condominium Boards are responsible for ensuring that the property manager, minute-taker and other professionals attending their meetings can perform their tasks in a stress-free and safe environment. A virtual meeting allows 100% protection of the health and safety of all participants. The absence of physical proximity prevents the spread of disease and the transmission of other infectious ailments. Further, as travelling to meetings is no longer necessary, traffic accidents and vehicle emissions are significantly reduced, resulting in a safer and healthier environment for the collective community.

Despite the recent increase in number of participants allowed at social gatherings, it is recommended to restrict in-person meetings to people within the same social circle that trust one another. Should one of them become ill with COVID-19, the subsequent contact tracing process will then be reduced as well. Further, it is our experience that much time is wasted at in-person meetings in getting settled due to the invariable socializing that takes place, and as the environment is more casual with side conversations and frequent 'segues', in-person meetings tend to run longer.

Hybrid meetings are also not ideal. Some sites have attempted a 'hybrid' style meeting format with some attending in person and others, including the minute-taker, attending remotely. This has proved to be quite challenging, as the audio is often quite poor, which is especially problematic when participants talk over one another or engage in side conversations. Often there is audio feedback if multiple computers are used in the same room, and those who attend remotely often have difficulty hearing everything if a cell phone is set up in the middle of the table (and there's the conundrum as to who is willing to have their phone exposed in this manner?)

In our experience, many of our condominium Boards are continuing to meet virtually as a standard practice going forward. It is our recommendation that each condominium complex obtain its own virtual meeting platform account, as the same account can be used for consultations other than Board meetings, such as meetings with the property manager, vendors, lawyers, etc. If a site consists of several corporations, the Shared Facilities could pay the account fee and all the corporations could use it, provided they don't book their meetings within the same timeframe.

In my opinion, virtual meetings are the 'best practice' standard for this current period of our history, and most likely, into our long-term future as well!