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In-Person vs. Virtual

Post-Pandemic Meetings: Navigating the ‘New Normal’

It’s Time to Address the Elephant in the Room – Virtual Meetings Versus In-Person, and What Comes Next



For the better part of the past two years, condominium Boards have been holding their Board and Owner meetings virtually. There are many different platforms that are able to facilitate these meetings, with Zoom being the most popular, but MS Teams, Go-ToMeeting, GoogleMeet, Web-Ex, Skype and simple teleconference are also among the various options available.

The condominium community has had ample time and opportunity to become familiar with virtual technologies and the various features they offer. But now that the pandemic restrictions are easing, many condominiums are deliberating on whether or not to return to in-person meetings.

The elephant in the room

At many of the meetings that we’ve recently attended, there have been some conflicting opinions in this regard. Typically, someone will express a desire to continue

meeting virtually because they feel less rushed coming home after work, the meetings are convenient, and they are shorter. Several other Directors then chime in and say the same – they prefer the virtual format because they can remain in their units, the meetings proceed efficiently and to the point, and they don’t have to rush around getting their materials together and out to the party room. The Managers are also grateful for being home and not having to travel at night in awful weather or returning home late in the evening.

But then ... another member will insist on meeting in person ... and so they are at an impasse. It’s possible that your Board might be dealing with a similar scenario.

Pros and cons from a Director’s point of view

There are benefits and drawbacks to both types of meeting formats.

In-person meetings tend to be more social in nature, and in many cases the Board members gather to eat their dinner together and the accompanying conversation often focuses on world events, personal experiences, the weather, etc. The downside is, that in this casual setting, the ensuing meeting often includes off-topic chatter, Directors asking the manager to help them catch up on material that should have been reviewed in advance, frequent segues to other topics, extended debate on items that clearly are in need of more information before a proper decision can be made, side conversations etc. resulting in a significant amount of wasted and unproductive time.

On the other hand, virtual meetings are much more efficient and businesslike, which helps to facilitate the decision-making that the Board is responsible for. Members have typically reviewed the meeting material in advance, and platform features

such as screen sharing allow all attendees to literally 'be on the same page' when reviewing financial reports, last-minute quotes and/or correspondence, site maps for matters such as landscaping and exterior projects, etc. The participants can attend from wherever they happen to be at the time of the meeting, which is a boon to 'winter snow-birds', summer cottagers, and also allows more flexibility in setting a time for the meeting.

In my view, the only time that in-person attendance may be necessary at a Board meeting, is if a site review or walk-around is necessary as part of the decision-making process. This could be performed in advance of the actual meeting so that all necessary information is available during the meeting. However, if in-person meetings are deemed necessary from time to time, consider limiting them to once or twice a year if possible. Remember, meetings of Directors and Owners are business meetings, intended for the purpose of making decisions on behalf of the Corporation.

To resolve the conundrum, some corporations have considered a hybrid approach,

with some attending in person and others logging in remotely. This can be successfully facilitated if the meeting room has access to a good Wi-Fi signal. To enable

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virtual participation, set up a computer so the camera can catch most of the room and perform a test to ensure everyone is audible. Although not essential, a television or large 'slave' monitor equipped with

a webcam would be ideal, to further enhance the participation experience for all. Finally, the Chair of the meeting must be mindful to invite comments from remote participants, to restrict side conversations among in-person attendees, and to recap decisions to ensure everyone is clear on the outcomes of each discussion.

Pros and cons from a Unit-Owner's point of view

In-person meetings of owners allow an opportunity for neighbours to meet one another, and many corporations offer beverages and food as an enticement to attend. However, in-person meetings sometimes pose audibility and visual issues for people seated at the back of the room or behind a party room column. There is also the potential for the meeting to be dominated by one or two unruly people who refuse to observe proper decorum or respect, much to the chagrin of the hapless Chair who may be unable to maintain order. This often results in the need for security staff (or in some extreme cases, police) to defuse the situation or to escort the person out of the meeting, with much wasted time and emotions running high. In some cases, the



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meeting cannot resume at all and is closed down by the Chair, leading to additional costs to reschedule the meeting to conclude the unfinished business.

After experiencing a virtual format, many residents have expressed satisfaction with the ability to attend owner meetings from the comfort of their homes. Non-resident owners are particularly happy to attend remotely via this technology, as there is no longer the need to travel to the site. Virtual owner meetings are most often hosted by professionals with expertise in meeting protocols, which allows these meetings to proceed with the business at hand in an orderly and organized fashion. Further, the audio is very clear, and video presentations are conveniently displayed on an attendee's device.

If a social gathering is desired as a means of fostering community, these can be organized as a separate event. Informal 'Town Hall' information meetings and 'meet and greet' events are great ways to keep unit-owners informed and engaged.

The issue from a Guest's point of view

There are many professionals who perform various roles that require their attendance at your meetings. These include members of your property management team, the recording secretary, occasional guests such as engineers, contractors and other service providers, and in the case of owner meetings, the corporation auditor and sometimes the solicitor.

Most condominium lawyers and auditing firms have taken the position that they will no longer attend meetings in person. For other guests who are only required to attend for a portion of the meeting to address one topic, it no longer makes sense for them to travel to your site (very often during rush hour traffic), looking for parking for their vehicle, and then traveling back home, most often to find that their kids are already in bed.

Furthermore, current workplace legislation requires condominium Boards to ensure 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 against the transmission of various infectious ail-

ments. Further, as travelling to meetings is no longer necessary, traffic accidents and vehicle emissions are no longer a potential risk, resulting in a safer and healthier environment for the collective community.

The issue from the Recording Secretary's point of view

The same is the case for recording secretaries. Due to geographical limitations, the escalating cost of fuel, the extra time spent during travel, as well as potential health and safety risks, very few minute-takers are willing to attend meetings in person anymore. It has become extremely challenging and complicated for minute-

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taking companies to provide recording secretaries that would attend your meeting in person.

As condominium corporations are legally required to ensure that minutes are taken of their meetings, it would be prudent for condominium Boards to understand the benefits of virtual meetings from the recording secretary's perspective.

A particular 'pain point' is coverage. Many condominium Boards plan their meetings for the last week of the month, when the previous month's financial statements are in hand. To accommodate the increased workload during those weeks, minute-takers who attend virtually can cover more meetings back-to-back as geographical location and travel time would no longer be an issue. Further, on those super-busy days when the minute-takers are fully booked, a

virtual meeting can be easily recorded and the recording secretary can then prepare minutes of those meetings afterward, from the recording.

Another point is that meetings are easier to follow when there is only one speaker at a time. This goes for Board/Committee meetings as well as owner meetings. Virtual owner meetings in particular are much easier to follow now that there is only one speaker allowed at a time, and the audio is crystal clear. The speakers are always asked for their name and unit numbers, which are often displayed on the screen as well, and thus, can be identified more accurately. Usually, a speaker is only permitted to ask one question at a time, after which they are muted. This organized approach is a definite advantage for recording secretaries to ensure accuracy in capturing questions and answers, documenting who made and seconded motions and whether a motion passed, etc.

Finally, virtual meetings are run in a more orderly fashion. We have even seen timers used during requisition meetings and for candidate speeches to allow each person to have an equal opportunity to speak. This also leads to greater accuracy in the minutes.

From our experience, the most efficient and effective means of conducting a business meeting is using remote technology, and most corporations have embraced fully virtual meetings as the new 'best practice' going forward. The benefits are numerous: enhanced accessibility as meetings can be attended from any location using various devices; there is increased flexibility in meeting times to ensure quorum is achieved; the meetings are efficient, orderly and productive as only one person can speak at a time and screen sharing allows all participants to view pertinent documents at the same time; there is no risk of transmitting colds, viruses and other communicable diseases; elimination of paper waste is environmentally friendly, and a virtual meeting often saves on expenses, such as refreshments, paper/copier costs, and overtime charges.

Hopefully this article is helpful in addressing the 'elephant in the room' concerning the best way of holding your condominium's meetings! 