Report on Plan to Return to In-Person Metro Council Meetings

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This report will serve to provide information to the members of the Metropolitan Council on the background and context for online Metro Council meetings and the status of plans to return to in-person Metropolitan Council meetings.

Background

On March 11, 2020, the Metropolitan Council held its last in-person meeting since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Subsequent to that date, the Governor of the State of Louisiana put in place restrictions on large gatherings of people, closed public schools, and ultimately issued a state-wide stay at home order on March 31. As a result of some of those actions, both the March 18 Metro Council Zoning meeting and the March 25 regular Metro Council meeting were cancelled.

The executive order governing the stay-at-home order and associated guidance from the Attorney General and Legislative Auditor provided authority to hold public meetings via a videoconference or teleconference platform. The first online Metro Council meeting was held via the WebEx platform on April 8. On May 15, the governor lifted the stay-at-home order and announced that Louisiana was entering into Phase 1 of re-opening the economy. Under the Phase 1 order, the governor extended the authority to hold public meetings via online or teleconference platforms. On June 5 Governor Edwards announced that the state of Louisiana was entering Phase 2 of the economic reopening.

On June 22, the governor announced that the state of Louisiana would stay in Phase 2 instead of moving to Phase 3 on June 26. There were several factors that he pointed to in support of this decision, and one of those was the increase in cases traced to large indoor gatherings of people, including graduation celebrations and in local bars in Baton Rouge. According to the governor's executive order, during Phase 2 businesses and other entities are allowed to hold events at no more than 50% capacity. Also, the CDC currently still considers large gatherings even where distancing is possible as "high risk," and notes that in areas where there are higher levels of community transmission, the risk at medium-sized or large gatherings is higher.

Finally, a consideration for everyone attending is fact that for the past two days, the state announced a daily increase in cases over 1,000 for the first time since April.

Planning and Preparation for In-Person Meetings

The guiding principle that has been at the forefront of all considerations with respect to holding online versus in-person meetings has been, and will continue to be, safety. The determination of what is as safe as possible for Councilmembers, staff, and members of the public is hard to make when data and information change quickly; thus, it is not possible to pick a particular date in the future that we can be certain to be able to go back to in-person meetings. This is especially true in light of the fact that we

must follow the governor's orders with respect to numbers allowed in the Council Chambers, and that number depends on whether we stay in Phase 2 or Phase 3 of the economic reopening plan.

Although it is difficult to plan for a particular date to return to in person meetings, my office and the Office of Public Information have consulted with a number of different experts and agencies including other political subdivision governing authorities, an infectious disease physician, the Baton Rouge Fire Department, the City Parish buildings and grounds staff, Information Services staff, and the City-Parish audio visual contractor to make arrangements for returning to meetings in the Council Chambers with appropriate safeguards.

Additionally, I've asked the Parish Attorney's Office to explore and research the possibility of a hybrid public meeting where some Councilmembers and members of the public could be present in person, while others could participate remotely. There is no existing guidance from the governor on this possibility, but we are trying to explore all options for the future.

Planned Safeguards

The safeguards and associated actions we've arranged for include:

1. Increased spacing (at least 6 feet) of everyone in the Council Chambers, including Council members.
2. As a consequence of number one, preparing another seating area for some Council members in front of the dais (with appropriate spacing).
3. Installation of additional microphones and infrastructure for computers at the new seating area.
4. Marking off staff areas more clearly to decrease the numbers of people in each area of the Chambers.
5. Requiring use of face coverings by everyone in the Chambers, except when a person is speaking.
6. Marking off chairs to provide for proper distancing by members of the public.
7. A screening process for each person entering the Council Chambers.
8. Staff resources to ensure people are not gathering in the lobby.
9. Formulating a process by which members of the pubic who cannot sit in the Chambers because of capacity limits to be able to watch the meeting on television on site and enter the Chambers solely for the purpose of making public comment.
10. Scheduling increased cleaning in the Council Chambers and a means to sanitize the podium between users.

Considerations

There are many factors that impact the ability of the Metro Council to get back to in-person meetings safely abiding by the governor's order and CDC recommendations. Among those factors are the size and arrangement of the Council Chambers, the capacity of the Council Chambers, the relatively high number of members of the public who regularly attend Council meetings, the staff requirements to ensure compliance with strict rules for such a gathering, and the length of the Council meetings. Below I will address those issues.

Council member seating area. With proper distancing in place, only seven people can sit at the dais. As a result, five members of the Metro Council will have to be moved to tables in front of the dais and it may also be necessary to have Plexiglas screening in place for the members at those tables if it is not possible to allow for six feet of distance between members.

Capacity and seating for members of the public. The capacity of the public seating area of the Council Chambers is 72, however in order to maintain proper distancing, it is not possible to have 36 people in that seating area. The maximum number of people who would be able to fit with proper distancing and allowing for clear walkways is 20 to 25.

Prevention of gathering elsewhere in the building. The governor's executive order prohibits gatherings of people in waiting rooms or lobbies without proper distancing. Whether this means the lobby on the third floor or another location inside the building, observing and enforcing this prohibition will require additional staff. Alternatively, research has revealed that some governing bodies are allowing members of the public to line up (with distance) outside of the building to speak on particular items, while also providing a screen or screens for the public to be able to watch the meeting while it is in progress.

Summary

In closing, as of today, June 24, 2020, I cannot provide assurance that the Metro Council will return to in-person meetings on July 15 or July 22. The extension of Phase 2 is now expected to last at least until July 24. Assuming the state is able to move into Phase 3 at that point, the relative safety and logistically feasibility of returning to in person meetings will increase. All of this is dependent on information that changes frequently and data that is updated daily. My office is continually monitoring the data, recommendations from medical experts and government officials, and will move toward getting back to in person meetings in a way that is as safe as possible for all Councilmembers, City-Parish staff, and members of the public.