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In-person meetings to return next month

By Sora O'Doherty

Following an announcement by California Gov. Gavin Newsom that the COVID-19 state of emergency will end on Feb. 28, the Orinda City Council has concluded that it needs to return to in-person meetings beginning in March. At its meeting on Jan. 17, the city council discussed the possibility of continuing to allow members of the community to attend the meetings via the Zoom conference application. City Attorney Osa Wolff explained the prior rules before COVID and the new rules that might be in effect for future meetings. City Clerk Sheri Smith explained some of the difficulties about hosting hybrid meetings that would have the city council meet in person but allow the public to participate by Zoom.

The state-wide state of emergency that allowed public meetings to be held on Zoom was put in place on Oct. 5, 2021. Since that time, as required by state law, the City Council has determined that they desire to continue remote public meetings and make the necessary findings at least every 30 days.

The staff report noted that, while there are some constraints and obstacles to overcome regarding hybrid meetings, recent changes to the Brown Act have made it easier to utilize a teleconferencing option on an ongoing basis if certain conditions are met. Many residents and other attendees at City Council meetings may wish to be able to continue to participate remotely as well. Some cities, such as Foster City, have adopted a hybrid meeting policy where council meetings are held in person but participants can attend via Zoom.

Vice Mayor Darlene Gee expressed interest in exploring a hybrid scenario. She also asked, in the event that the council went back to in-person meetings, if streaming on the YouTube platform would be less "clunky" than the previous method of streaming used by the city. Smith said that would be possible, and agreed that it would be a simpler streaming method. She added that two-way participation via Zoom is definitively possible, but may be more difficult and expensive.

The city clerk and the council discussed various possible venues for hybrid meetings. The difficulty, the clerk explained, was the staff time and effort required to set up and take down equipment for a Zoom meeting where the library auditorium is used for many events. The Sarge Littlehale Community Room would be easier, but it is smaller. Mayor Inga Miller suggested that there might be benefits to using the community center at Wilder, but noted that there have been problems with acoustics in the past, and that the location might present an obstacle to staff going back and forth to the City Hall. Smith noted, "Anything is possible with the right resources and people."

In a discussion of the rules that would govern remote attendance for council members via Zoom, Gee noted that, although she travels for business, during COVID she missed only one meeting because it was possible for her to attend via Zoom. Wolff explained that the new rules would allow remote participation in certain circumstances, such as illness of the council member or a family member, but exclude business travel. In all circumstances, a majority of the council members will have to be present in person, meaning that at most two members could appear remotely, according to City Manager David Biggs.

While city staff considers that logistical considerations of returning to in-person meetings on any basis other than the prior traditional format, might prevent the city from offering a hybrid option, they agreed to explore offering a teleconference option in addition to the in-person meetings given council interest in that possibility. The matter will return to the city council at a later meeting, when staff will present options, including associated costs, including both one-time technology needs and any ongoing costs.

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