



TOWN OF PORTOLA VALLEY

STAFF REPORT

TO: Mayor and Members of the Town Council

FROM: Cara Silver, Town Attorney

DATE: January 11, 2023

RE: Adoption of Resolution Confirming the State of Emergency and Need to Continue Conducting Town Public Meetings Remotely

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Town Council adopt the attached Resolution Confirming the State of Emergency and Need to Continue Conducting Town Public Meetings Remotely.

BACKGROUND

On September 16, the Governor signed AB 361, amending the Ralph M. Brown Act (Brown Act) to allow legislative bodies to continue to meet virtually during the present public health emergency. AB 361 is an urgency bill which goes into effect on October 1, 2021 and expires on January 1, 2024 (portions of the bill applying to the State legislature and school districts expire earlier). The bill extends the teleconference procedures authorized in Executive Order N-29-20 (set to expire September 30, 2021) during the current COVID-19 pandemic and allows future teleconference procedures under limited circumstances defined in the bill. Effective October 1, 2021, cities must comply with AB 361 if they want to conduct remote meetings.

AB 361 applies to meetings during a proclaimed state of emergency and the legislative body has made a finding that meeting in person would "present an imminent risk to the health or safety of attendees". "State of emergency" is defined as a state of emergency declared by the Governor under Government Code Section 8625.

AB 361 requires several procedural safeguards, such as giving the public ability to address the legislative body directly, providing information on how to address the body, providing either a call-in or internet-based service option, requirement to stop meeting if call-in or internet-based option fails due to measures under the control of the Town, comments may not be required to be submitted in advance, and pre-registrations (except as required by call-in or internet platform) are prohibited.

Public members must be given a reasonable time to register to provide public comment and agencies that provide a timed public comment period shall not close the public comment period until that timed period has expired.

If the legislative body desires to continue using the teleconference exception, it must confirm the circumstances of the state of emergency 30 days after the first teleconference meeting and every 30 days thereafter.

DISCUSSION

Town staff has installed a new system in the Schoolhouse to accommodate hybrid remote meetings. This system has also been installed in the Community Hall. On April 27, 2022, the Council conducted its first hybrid meeting and plans to continue meeting this way. However, some members of the Council, its commissions/committees, staff and the public may want to continue attending remotely. Given the continued presence of COVID-19 in the community, in person meetings would present an imminent risk to the health or safety of certain attendees.

AB 361 requires the Council to make a regular finding confirming the state of emergency and the need for continued remote meetings. Staff will therefore be agendaizing this finding on every Council meeting agenda until a decision to transition to completely in person meetings has been made. Council will also be requested to make these findings on behalf of its commissions and committees as well, so there is a uniform policy on public meetings.

FISCAL IMPACT

There is no fiscal impact associated with continued remote meetings.

ATTACHMENT

1. Resolution

RESOLUTION NO. ____

**RESOLUTION OF THE TOWN COUNCIL OF THE TOWN OF PORTOLA
VALLEY CONFIRMING EXISTING STATE EMERGENCY AND AUTHORIZING
CONTINUED REMOTE PUBLIC MEETINGS UNDER AB 361**

The Town Council of the Town of Portola Valley does RESOLVE as follows:

WHEREAS, on March 4, 2020, the Governor of the State of California declared a state of emergency, as defined under the California Emergency Services Act, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the State of Emergency remains in effect;

WHEREAS, beginning in March 2020, the Governor's Executive Order N-29-20 suspended Brown Act requirements related to teleconferencing during the COVID-19 pandemic provided that notice, accessibility, and other requirements were met, and the public was allowed to observe and address the legislative body at the meeting;

WHEREAS, Executive Order N-08-21 extended the previous order until September 30, 2021;

WHEREAS, the Town Council and the Town's boards, commissions, and committees have conducted their meetings virtually, as authorized by the Executive Order, since March 17, 2020;

WHEREAS, on September 16, 2021, Governor Newsom signed into law Assembly Bill 361 ("AB 361"), which provides that a local agency legislative body may continue to meet remotely without complying with otherwise-applicable requirements in the Brown Act related to remote/teleconference meetings by local agency legislative bodies, provided that a state of emergency has been declared and the legislative body determines that meeting in person would present imminent risks to the health or safety of attendees, and provided that the legislative body continues to make such findings at least every 30 days during the term of the declared state of emergency;

WHEREAS, Cal/OSHA COVID-19 Emergency Temporary Standards ("ETS") require certain employers to implement social distancing requirements in the work place during the current COVID-19 pandemic; and effective February 14, 2022, the Town Manager issued updated work place guidelines imposing safety protocols on persons attending Town Hall facilities;

WHEREAS, in the last few months, while hospitalizations and severe illnesses have gone down, new COVID-19 variants have emerged and continued to impact the County's hospital capacity;

WHEREAS, these variants are believed by medical experts to be even more contagious as previous variants, and data has shown the variant has increased transmissibility even among some vaccinated people;

WHEREAS, due to uncertainty and concerns about the continuing presence of COVID-19 variants, many workplaces that had announced a return to regular in-person operations have pushed back the full return date until later in the year or next year;

WHEREAS, virtual meetings have not diminished the public's ability to observe and participate and have expanded opportunities to do so for some communities; and

WHEREAS, given the heightened risks of the predominant variant of COVID-19 in the community, holding meetings with all members of the legislative body, staff, and the public in attendance in person in a shared indoor meeting space would pose an unnecessary and immediate risk to the attendees.

WHEREAS, the Council has again reconsidered the circumstances of the state of emergency and finds that the state of emergency continues to impact the ability of members of the Town Council, commissions and committees and public to meet in person because there is a continuing threat of COVID19 to the community, and because Town meetings have characteristics that give rise to risks to health and safety of meeting participants (such as the increased mixing associated with bringing together people from across the community, the need to enable those who are immunocompromised or unvaccinated to be able to safely continue to participate fully in public governmental meetings, and the challenges with fully ascertaining and ensuring compliance with vaccination and other safety recommendations at such meetings);

WHEREAS, persons experiencing any potential symptoms of COVID-19, or who test positive but are asymptomatic, or who are exposed to someone with COVID19, should follow medical advice regarding self-isolation or self-quarantine, avoiding public gatherings such as in-person meetings of public agencies, and should be able to do so without sacrificing their right to participate in public business during periods of self-isolation or self-quarantine;

WHEREAS, the onset of symptoms of COVID-19 or a positive test may occur too close to the start of a meeting for alternative arrangements for attendance to be made consistently with the Brown Act, such that a remote attendance option for public meetings should be maintained for as long as COVID transmission remains a potential risk of in-person meetings;

WHEREAS, the Town Council has an important interest in protecting the health and safety of those who participate in public Town meetings; and

WHEREAS, the Town Council finds that this state of emergency continues to directly impact the ability of members of the Town Council and its commissions and committees to meet safely in person and that meeting in person would present imminent risks to the health or safety of attendees, and the Council will therefore continue to invoke the provisions of AB 361 related to teleconferencing for meetings of the Town Council and its commissions and committees in order to provide its members as well as staff and members of the public with

the option of participating in its meetings remotely whenever necessary or advisable for them to do so.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Town Council of the Town of Portola Valley that:

1. The Town Council adopts the recitals set forth above as findings of fact.
2. The Town Council hereby determines that, as a result of the emergency, meeting in person presents imminent risks to the health or safety of attendees.
3. In accordance with AB 361, based on the findings and determinations herein, meetings of the Town Council and Town commissions and committees will be held virtually or in a hybrid format allowing officials and the public to attend virtually or in person, with Brown Act teleconferencing rules suspended. Public meetings conducted outside may be conducted in person.
4. This resolution shall be effective upon adoption and remain in effect so long as the Council confirms the continuing state of emergency and need for remote meetings as required under AB 361.

PASSED AND ADOPTED this 11th day of January 2023.

By: _____
Jeff Aalfs, Mayor

ATTEST:

Melissa Thurman, MMC
Town Clerk