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LEEANN PELHAM
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Date: February 12, 2018

To: LeeAnn Pelham, Executive Director

From: Pat Ford, Policy Analyst
Steven Massey, Director of Technology Services

Re: **Telephonic Participation in Commission Meetings**

This memorandum provides information regarding the possibility of instituting a phone system that would allow members of the community to participate in Ethics Commission meetings without being physically present. We provide this information as a further update in response to recent inquiries by the Commission about whether and how it might institute such a phone system for the Commission's regular monthly meetings.

Background

At previous regular meetings, the Commission has expressed interest in implementing a telephonic system that would allow members of the public to participate remotely in Commission meetings. The Commission's interest in this technology was based on its high priority placed on encouraging public participation. At the Commission's urging, Staff has researched the possibility of implementing a public telephonic system for use in Commission meetings.

Findings

Technical Requirements and Costs

On January 29, 2018, Staff met with City Hall Media and Security Systems staff to discuss the technical requirements for a phone system that would enable remote public comment.

Given the existing technology systems that are in place in the City Hall meeting rooms, there is only one method for implementing telephonic participation in Commission meetings. This method involves the use of an audio device called a "hybrid unit." The hybrid unit can patch a single telephone line into the meeting room's audio and visual systems.¹ This telephone line would act as a party line into which members of the public could call.

¹ Because the Commission's meetings are televised and recorded, it is necessary that any telephonic public comment system is able to connect to the room's audio-visual systems in this way.

Using this existing technology, a staff member would monitor the line during the meeting and identify callers who wish to comment on a particular agenda item. During the time for public comment, the staff member would patch the party line into the meeting room's audio system, and the callers would be able to make their public comment. When no more callers have public comment on the agenda item, the staff member would mute the party line.

There is currently only one hybrid unit in City Hall, and it is in use by the Mayor's Disability Council (MDC). The MDC meetings during the same time that the Commission holds its regular meetings. To enable public comment through this party line, the Ethics Commission would need to purchase an additional hybrid unit. Media and Security Systems staff are preparing an official estimate, and they approximate that the cost would be between \$2,000 and \$3,000. Media and Security Systems estimates they could install the unit within approximately one month from the time the Commission purchases it. Additionally, there would be a nominal cost associated with creating a phone line for use as the party line.

Implementation and Use

Implementation of a hybrid unit telephone would require creation of a single party line and publishing of the telephone number to call in on the Commission's website. Because the hybrid unit can patch in one telephone line only, this line would function as a party line on which all callers who wish to make public comment are present simultaneously. This is contrast, for example, to how a radio station call-in operates, in which each caller is awaiting his or her turn to speak on a different phone line. Here, any caller who is on the line would be able to speak directly into the meeting room's audio system as soon as Staff patches the line into the audio system. Callers would need to agree to their order in a speaking queue. If a caller were to speak out of turn, the Commission's only recourse would be to mute the party line and request all callers to abide by the rules of the meeting. There hybrid unit does not allow for a single caller to be disconnected, for example, to prevent a disorderly or abusive caller from speaking through the line over other callers. Disconnecting the party line in its entire in the event of such abuse is problematic, because that disconnection would abridge the ability of all other callers to deliver their public comment.

Staff would need to continuously monitor the party line, speak with callers who wish to make public comment, and patch in the line when appropriate. According to the MDC, which currently uses a hybrid unit and party line, this task requires the devoted attention of one staff member during the duration of the Council's meetings. MDC staff approximates that a typical MDC agenda item garners two to three public commenters, and that eight public commenters on a single agenda item would be unusual. Considering that the Commission's rate of public comment tends to be considerably higher, with some agenda items attracting dozens of public commenters, it is likely that the Commission would experience a high call volume on the party line if one were implemented. Maintaining an effective public comment process would require intaking and queueing callers on the party line before patching them into the meeting and calling each of them in turn to deliver their comment.

Please let us know if you would like any additional information, or if you would like us to be present for any questions by the Commission at their meeting on February 16.