



CITY of CALABASAS

CITY COUNCIL AGENDA REPORT

DATE: JANUARY 12, 2024

TO: HONORABLE MAYOR AND COUNCILMEMBERS

FROM: MICHAEL RUSSO, COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: COUNCIL DISCUSSION ON WHETHER TO RE-ESTABLISH THE PRACTICE OF HYBRID CITY COUNCIL MEETINGS ENABLING THE PUBLIC TO PARTICIPATE REMOTELY OR IN-PERSON

MEETING

DATE: JANUARY 24, 2024

BACKGROUND AND DISCUSSION:

On March 17, 2020, the Governor issued an Executive Order suspending certain provisions of the Ralph M. Brown Act in order to allow for local legislative bodies to conduct their meetings completely telephonically or by other electronic means. The Calabasas City Council held remote meetings via Zoom starting in April 2020. On October 26, 2022, Council approved and adopted Resolution 2022-1821 establishing a Hybrid Meeting Policy. That same month, Council held its first hybrid meeting, allowing members of the public, staff or Council members to participate either in person or remotely. In February 2023, the Council directed that all City Commissions should also be conducted as hybrid meetings with in-person and Zoom for a two-month trial period in March and April to gauge virtual attendance by the public.

HYBRID LITE

Following the trial period, the Council decided to stop the use of hybrid meetings via Zoom for all City Commissions due to the lack of use by the public, plus the extra

staff time and cost to taxpayers to produce a hybrid meeting. The Council opted for a so-called “hybrid lite” model in that no Commission meetings would be hybrid except those involving controversial topics in which there would be increased public interest and participation. From May 2023 through the end of the year, there were six such Commission meetings changed to hybrid on an ad hoc basis.

Council meetings had remained hybrid. On October 25, 2023, people pretending to be residents conducted a so-called *Zoom Bombing* when, during a Council meeting, they called in via Zoom using fake identities, and starting spewing anti-Semitic hate speech live during a meeting. The anonymity of a Zoom caller makes it very difficult to control. The City Manager decided to suspend the use of Zoom for meetings and temporarily return to traditional in-person meetings through the end of 2023. A similar *Zoom Bombing* incident occurred at the January 10, 2024 Council meeting, which was put on Zoom because of the renovation project for CTV master control. Incidents such as this have happened in many jurisdictions throughout the United States recently, and even at a SCAG meeting earlier this month.

DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS:

At Council meetings on February 8, 2023, February 22, 2023, and May 10, 2023 staff made presentations focusing on the cost of producing meetings in a hybrid format – where some participants are remote and some in Chambers. Staff showed hybrid meetings are much more labor-intensive and more expensive to produce than in-person meetings, such as those held before March 2020. In fact, the cost is more than double.

What makes a Zoom hybrid meeting worth the extra cost for taxpayers is to know that people are actually using the system to – not just to watch – but to participate remotely. For residents, the chance to look their elected representative in the eye can be usurped if there are health, scheduling or transportation issues that make it hard to get to City Hall. Anybody hosting a Zoom meeting (technically, a Council meeting is a Zoom “webinar”) can get a readout of attendance of those using the service. We looked at the metrics and the numbers are very low. The table below shows attendance via Zoom for the Council meetings for much of the second half of 2023.

Council Meeting Date	Overall Zoom Audience (minus staff)	Zoom Participants with Comments
August 9	9	4
August 23	7	0
September 13	7	2
September 27	10	0

October 11	6	1
October 25	19	2 +
November 8	No Zoom	---
December 6	No Zoom	---
December 13	No Zoom	---

The largest Zoom audience came for the October 25, 2023 Council meeting, but several of those were the *Zoom Bombers* whose only interest was to disrupt the meeting. Without them, the Zoom audience would likely be only half that number. Also, some of those using Zoom may not be speaking to Council and are simply watching the feed – which can also be done using the traditional CTV cablecast, or the live stream on the City’s website.

REQUESTED ACTION:

Taking into consideration the amount spent to produce hybrid meetings, the Council may decide between three options and provide direction to staff:

1. Rescind Resolution 2022-1821 and return to the traditional in-person model used at the end of 2023 – no Zoom.
2. Go back to Zoom hybrids.
3. Use the so-called Hybrid Lite model and use Zoom only for meetings with items of extra high public interest.

ATTACHMENTS:

PowerPoint Presentation