Legislation Details (With Text)

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Date	Ver.	Action By	Action	Result

REQUEST FOR CITY COUNCIL ACTION

DATE: 01/19/2022

TO: Honorable Mayor and City Council Members

FROM: Office of the City Manager - Communications Division

SUBJECT:
Virtual Oral Public Comments in Public Meetings.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:
Due to safety protocols around COVID-19, the City of Corona implemented and successfully executed virtual public meetings beginning in March 2020. As safety protocols shifted and in person meetings resumed, the option for virtual oral public comments was discontinued once the public was able to attend meetings and provide public comment in person. This request, by Mayor Wes J. Speake, is to reinstate virtual oral public comments during public meetings.

RECOMMENDED ACTION:
That the City Council provide staff with direction on allowing virtual oral public comments during public meetings via Zoom.

PROPOSED OPTIONS:

1. Allow virtual oral public comments during public meetings via Zoom.

2. Do NOT allow virtual oral public comments during public meetings via Zoom.

3. Allow virtual oral public comment via Zoom for a three-month trial period beginning with the February 2, 2022 City Council meeting and review the item again on May 4, 2022 for final consideration.

BACKGROUND:
Due to safety protocols around COVID-19, Governor Newsom issued Executive Order N-29-20 on March 17, 2020, mandating that City Hall and the meeting chambers be closed to the public and that virtual participation in public meetings be made available. Following this Order, the City of Corona implemented and successfully executed virtual public meetings. During this time, virtual public comment was offered when the City Council met virtually from April 1, 2020 - May 12, 2020, and again from December 16, 2020 - March 3, 2021. The process to submit and give virtual oral public comments required the public to submit "virtual speaker cards" via email and included a waiting period of 1-minute after every agenda item to account for the delay in the live stream while waiting for the speakers to email in for public comment. Once a request for public comments was received, staff would email the requestor a link to join the meeting via Zoom so they could provide their public comment. This process was inefficient and resulted in multiple delays during the meetings. As safety protocols shifted, the City Council resumed in-person meetings and the public was once again permitted to attend meetings and provide their public comment in person, which resulted in the discontinuation of virtual oral public comment. Currently, as an alternative to providing in person public comment, the public can participate virtually by watching the meetings online and submitting their comments via email for the City Clerk to read aloud during the public comment period.

ANALYSIS:
With more use and other improvements, the City of Corona's public meeting format and broadcast systems can provide the capability for an efficient way to conduct virtual oral public comments via Zoom. The process for submitting a "virtual speaker card" and then giving a virtual oral public comment can happen in real time and mirror the process for in-person oral public comment. If this capability is instituted, public participants viewing the meeting on Zoom can submit their "virtual speaker card" by typing their name and agenda item into the Zoom chat. The Zoom chat will be monitored by the City Clerk and recorded for public record. Each virtual speaker will then be orally queued by the City Clerk when it is their turn for public comment, the same way an in-person public speaker is queued. This new process for virtual oral public comments would eliminate the meeting delays caused by the original process and greatly lowers the barrier for public participation at public meetings.

Implementation of this process will require minimal staff time and minor changes to public meeting workflow. Most staff time for this project will be allocated to public outreach in informing the public of the new process.

City Council is being asked to consider whether they want to allow virtual oral public comments during meetings via Zoom or to continue with their current process and only allow public comment to be provided in person and via email. As an alternative, City Council can decide to allow virtual oral public comment to be submitted via Zoom for a trial period of three-months and reconsider the matter once there is a better understanding of how the Zoom public comment process will work.

FINANCIAL IMPACT:
There is minimal costs associated with implementing virtual oral public comment in public meetings. The City will require no upgrades or additions to current broadcast systems or the meeting platform. Thus, the only costs will come from staff time for public outreach to inform the public of the new process for making virtual oral public comment.

ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:
This action is exempt pursuant to Section 15061(b)(3) of the Guidelines for the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), which states that a project is exempt from CEQA if the activity is covered by the common sense exemption that CEQA applies only to projects that have the potential for causing a significant effect on the environment. Where it can be seen with certainty that there is no possibility that the activity in question may have a significant effect on the environment, the activity is not subject to CEQA. The requested action is for virtual oral public comments during public meetings via Zoom, and there is no possibility that instituting this process will have a significant effect on the environment. Therefore, no further environmental review is required.

PREPARED BY: SHAUGHN HULL, CHIEF COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER