



January 25, 2021

Dear Mayor Stothert and Members of the Omaha City Council,

It is my pleasure to write in support of [Councilmember Festersen's Res. 2021-0035](#), which would amend the City Council's Rules of Order to allow permanent virtual participation by members of the public via Zoom conferencing.

Nebraskans need more options for participating in the local and state government process. Local and state government officials in Nebraska will acknowledge that their proceedings are often sparsely attended.

The pandemic has posed a serious barrier for many members of the public who wish to fully and safely participate in local and state government. But COVID-19 is only one obstacle to participation.

Many public bodies meet at times that make in-person attendance impractical for members of the public. Furthermore, the time required for proceeding through an entire public meeting agenda, while necessary work for officials, can discourage busy residents from publicly expressing their views on a particular item.

As another good example, in the week this amendment is scheduled to be heard, the Omaha area is being inundated with a winter storm that could make transportation for an in-person meeting impossible for some area residents. Although inclement weather and certain emergency situations are part of life in Nebraska, we now have the technology to help people and governments overcome part of the inconvenience and disruption associated with them.

Efforts to provide additional transparency and participation in local and state government are sometimes thought to be a liability for policymakers, or at least a slight to the capability of their administration.

But the last year has been an impressive trial-run for using conferencing tools like Zoom to help bridge the gap between people in all organizations, and build a stronger network for solving difficult problems. Councilmember Festersen's amendment would not only allow the Council to hear from more of the public, but welcome more Omahans to be informed about the business of the Council and the City of Omaha.

On behalf of the Platte Institute, I would like to commend this proposal and encourage your support. Our hope is that the City of Omaha sets an example for open government that can be replicated across Nebraska.

Sincerely,

*Jim Vokal*

Chief Executive Officer  
Platte Institute