

FIRST PERSON: HOW WISCONSIN PREPARED FOR, AND HELD, ITS FIRST-EVER VIRTUAL LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Ability to adapt, function is critical to public confidence during uncertain times



by Wisconsin Senate President Roger Roth

In early March, the Wisconsin State Senate was set to wind down its regular, two-year legislative session. As Senate president (the body's presiding officer), I was gearing up to take up a lengthy calendar of bills for session day, planned for late March.

That didn't happen.

The session day was postponed amid a statewide shutdown of businesses and schools — the same type of emergency action taken across the nation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Changes had to be made to the way we all live and work. The result was that on April 15, the Wisconsin State Senate did something new — hold a virtual session.

Compared to most states, Wisconsin was a step ahead, thanks to a statute already in place that allowed us to legally be able to conduct a virtual session. In 2008, the Wisconsin Legislature formed the Special Committee on Emergency

Management and Continuity of Government, which was charged with making recommendations on legislative operations during emergencies.

One of those recommendations resulted in legislation permitting the Legislature to meet virtually in the event of a disaster. However, until this year, such a session had never been done.

Wisconsin's law governing virtual meetings (Act 363 of 2009) requires that each senator's identity be verified and that all members may simultaneously hear or read the comments of each member recognized to speak. In addition, any document used in the meeting, such as a legislative amendment, must be immediately transmitted to participating members.

With these rules as guidance, I began constant communication with the Legislative Technologies Services Bureau (LTSB), the Senate chief clerk and the Senate sergeant-at-arms on the possibility — and later the actuality — of planning a virtual session.

NUTS AND BOLTS OF PREPARING FOR A VIRTUAL SESSION

In the weeks leading up to the virtual session, our LTSB built a website to meet the needs of conducting the usual business of a session day in a new way.

In conjunction with the video conference service Skype for Business, the website allowed members to request to speak and cast their votes electronically. This information was transmitted to the computer screens of the presiding officer and chief clerk.

When it was determined that legislation

would be necessary to address the pandemic, Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald decided to conduct a virtual session out of caution for our members, their families and their staff who may be vulnerable to COVID-19.

Once the session schedule was set, the Committee on Senate Organization adopted procedural changes specific to convening in virtual session, including allowing votes to be cast electronically, requiring most amendments to be introduced before the beginning of session, and limiting the physical presence of members.

As presiding officer, I conducted the session from a state Capitol hearing room equipped with the latest technologies and multiple screens.

To adhere to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's social distancing guidelines, the room was set up to ensure the safety of those physically present. Everything was thoroughly cleaned and the floors were taped to guarantee everyone was six or more feet away from the person next to them.

Physical attendance was limited to essential personnel, including the Senate chief clerk, sergeant-at-arms, technical support staff and our chief legislative counsel, along with Senate leadership, to facilitate the debate and floor action.

All members were present in a virtual manner from locations across the state. They were encouraged to find a quiet room with a consistent Wi-Fi connection. Many chose to remain at home, others preferred being in their Capitol offices.

Each member has a state-issued laptop, which greatly aided in the consistency and reliability of the virtual system.

Prior to the session day, I held a training exercise with senators, so everyone was comfortable and familiar with the setup and the applications being used. During the session, each member could request immediate technical assistance either by phone or by clicking a technical support button on his or her screen.

E-DAY

On virtual session day, each member was asked to log in and join the meeting ahead of the actual start time. Our information technology staff then confirmed that each member could see and hear the conference.

Wisconsin's virtual session law also requires that the public, to the extent technology will allow, be able to observe

WISCONSIN REQUIREMENTS FOR VIRTUAL SESSIONS (ACT 363 OF 2009)

- ✓ Participating members' identities must be verified and actions authenticated
- ✓ Participating members must be able to simultaneously read/hear comments of members recognized to speak
- ✓ Documents accepted by the presiding officer or chair must be immediately transmitted to participating members
- ✓ The public must be able to monitor proceedings within technological limits
- ✓ Each house must issue a notice of emergency to meet virtually

the proceedings. The WisconsinEye Network, our state's public affairs broadcaster, routinely provides live, unedited coverage of state proceedings via remote cameras, and its coverage of our April virtual session was no different.

Members of the press were able to view the session through WisEye's streaming service. In addition, one journalist and one photographer were physically present to provide a pool feed to the press corps.

The virtual extraordinary session ran smoothly — although the speed of session had to run at a slower pace to allow for lag time — with minimal hiccups. When a member spoke, the Skype program would spotlight the speaker.

When a vote was required, members voted electronically, and then the Senate chief clerk verbally announced the votes. The virtual session was successful because initial steps had been taken immediately and contingencies planned for.

The Senate unanimously (32-0) passed a bill giving Wisconsin access to nearly \$2 billion in federal relief in response to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Through this virtual session, and with both houses unanimously passing the bill, we showed the public that no matter what comes our way, our government is going to endure.

It is important to instill confidence that the functions of a legislature will continue uninterrupted during times of unprecedented and rapidly changing events. While the public saw many events in their lives canceled, their state government proved capable of meeting in times of uncertainty and distress.

Roger Roth has been president of the Wisconsin Senate since 2017. He was first elected to the Legislature in 2006 (Assembly) and to the Senate in 2014.



Wisconsin Senate leadership and Senate staffers meet in a hearing room in the Capitol while members join online from their homes or offices in the Legislature's historic, first virtual session, held on April 15. (photo courtesy of Sen. Roger Roth's office)

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