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

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. (photos courtesy of Sen. Roger Roth's office)

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.

As Senate president, 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.

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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 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 WisconsinEye’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 the 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.

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