



Pandemic Operations for Environmental Commissions & Committees (ECs)

ANJEC has developed this guidance for ECs to help facilitate typical activities during this new, abnormal period of social distancing. We don't know how long the Covid-19 global pandemic will last, but we do know that environmental challenges such as climate change, plastic pollution, and disappearing habitats will outlast the current health crisis. It is critical that ECs continue to work and advocate locally to uphold and advance our 50-plus-year history of progress in environmental protection in New Jersey. By keeping up our momentum, we can ensure that after the pandemic dust settles, we can still celebrate the protection and restoration of clean water, clear air, and open spaces that we all cherish and richly deserve.

We recommend that ECs review and adapt their 2020 goals for the year in line with their local priorities and circumstances. While our physical office remains closed at time of publication, ANJEC is here to help. Email us at: info@anjec.org and a staff member will reach out to you with assistance.

The Basics

Meetings:

Governor Murphy issued Executive Order 103 on March 9, 2020, declaring a State Of Emergency due to Covid-19, and issued Executive Order 107 on March 21, 2020, better known as "Stay at Home" directives, to control the coronavirus outbreak. The New Jersey Legislature subsequently adopted A3850/S2294, signed it into law by Governor Murphy, permitting virtual or teleconferenced municipal meetings during a State of Emergency.

The New Jersey Department of Community Affairs (NJDCA) has published guidance to clarify the new virtual meetings law. At the time of this publication, that guidance can be found at:

<https://nj.gov/dca/divisions/dlgs/pdf/GovConnectNotice-NewRemotePublicMeetingsGuidance.pdf>.

This document is meant to serve as guidance for ECs and is based on ANJEC's more than 50 years of experience working with municipalities to protect New Jersey' environment and natural resources at the local level. It should NOT be taken as legal advice or as a substitution for legal advice.



Notice & Advertisement:

The NJDCA guidance refers to meetings that need to comply with the *Open Public Meetings Act (OPMA)*. **ANJEC recommends that ALL ECs comply with OPMA, especially if an EC has a budget,** which makes them stewards of taxpayer funds, and obligated to comply with OPMA. EC meeting schedules are most often published at the beginning of the year for the entirety of that calendar year. Just like meetings of the governing body, planning board, and zoning board of adjustment, EC meetings must be noticed in the municipality's newspaper of record and should also be listed on the town's or EC's website. Consider also advertising your meeting on social media to encourage public attendance.

Virtual Meeting Tips:

ANJEC recommends that environmental commissions continue holding scheduled meetings during the pandemic. Failing to meet could have long term negative impacts on the operations of your EC and your community. Regular meetings provide ECs with opportunities to address local environmental needs, review applications for development and hear from community members. EC chairs and co-chairs should decide on a preferred virtual platform. There are several free options available, and ANJEC staff can advise you on these on an individual basis. Ideally, ECs should use the same platform as the governing body and/or planning board. Doing so will minimize municipal costs and make it easier for the public to participate. Be sure to consult with and inform your municipal attorney and other town officials about your planned meetings.

Virtual meetings should be planned carefully. Free virtual meeting software often has time limits, most commonly 40 minutes, and may also limit the number of participants. Be sure to establish an agenda in advance. Assign specific EC members to various agenda items to provide updates and/or lead discussions. Be sure to allow time for public comment at each meeting. Make certain to take notes for meeting minutes or record the meeting.

Best practices on virtual meetings include making sure everyone is muted when they are not speaking. Ask participants to turn off their video stream if they have distracting activities in the background or need to walk around. Minimizing distractions will help with the flow of meetings.

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BE CAREFUL TO AVOID HAVING A QUORUM OF EC MEMBERS ON EMAILS,, PHONE CALLS OR VIRTUAL CONFERENCES FOR ANYTHING OTHER THAN A MEETING REMINDER. SUCH DISCUSSIONS WITH A QUORUM CONSTITUTE A MEETING AND WOULD VIOLATE OPMA.

Building & Maintaining Relationships:

Good relationships and communication are more important now than they ever have been. Social distancing and stay-at-home requirements may make it more difficult in some ways to interact with your mayor and members of your governing body, who now have a whole new set of priorities to manage in addition to all of their usual obligations prior to the pandemic. **Be sure to be proactive in communicating with your officials. Keep them informed about your meetings, activities, and priorities.** Don't wait to reach out to them until you have a concern. Find ways to let them know the value you continue to bring to the community. While publishing an annual report is required for EC's, more frequent interim reports can be helpful. For example, at least one community submitted a 2020 Priorities Letter to the Mayor and Town Council prioritizing projects in light of decreased budget and logistical constraints.

Community Presence & Leadership

Your EC needs to find new ways to engage with the public to make your presence and your work known. **Take advantage of calendar events that provide you a natural opportunity to talk about your ECs projects and goals.** Consider tabling or being a speaker at local outdoor gatherings that may occur as restrictions are lifted (farmers markets, fall or film festivals, garden days, art openings etc.). Always wear a mask and maintain social distance. Consider hosting virtual events to celebrate and inform your community about EC projects that tie in to the following global events:

July 1 -30 Plastic Free July (global movement)

July 11 World Population Day (food scarcity)

Sept. 16 - International Day for Preservation of the Ozone Layer (30th anniversary)

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Sept. 19 - Ocean Conservancy's International Clean Up (35th anniversary)

Oct. 16 - World Food Day

Dec. 5 - World Soil Day

Movie nights: At this writing ANJEC and other organizations are offering virtual environmental movie screenings. You can advertise these events as co-hosted by your EC and hold follow-up sessions to talk about how your community is addressing a variety of environmental issues.

Guest presenters: Take advantage of hearing from your regional experts (AmeriCorps NJ Water Ambassadors, NJ Soil Conservation District Managers, NJ Division of Air Quality (Community Corners Mapping), NJ Division of Fish and Wildlife, etc.) as well state chapters of Audubon, college professors, environmental lawyer, environmental service engineers, organic farmers, etc. by hosting virtual community education sessions. .

Park, beach, and stream cleanups: Cleanups and other outdoor activities are starting to take place with proper safety measures and social distancing protocols in place. ANJEC can put you in touch with other communities carrying out these events so you can learn about how they are doing so safely.

While we don't yet know when the pandemic will end and wearing masks or socially distance become a thing of the past, we know that we need to continue to work on solving environmental challenges at the local level, because it's the most effective way of solving our global environmental problems. ANJEC continues to be a resource for you and your community. We are working virtually and are fully operational. The best way to reach us during these times is at our individual staff emails or info@anjec.org

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