



State of Connecticut

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September 11, 2020

Senator Martin Looney
President Pro Tempore
Legislative Office Building, Room 3300
Hartford, Connecticut 06106

Representative Joe Aresimowicz
Speaker of the House of Representatives
Legislative Office Building, Room 4100
Hartford, Connecticut 06106

Senator Bob Duff
Senate Majority Leader
Legislative Office Building, Room 3900
Hartford, CT 06106-1591

Representative Matt Ritter
House Majority Leader
Legislative Office Building, Room 3004
Hartford, CT 06106-1591

Dear President Looney, Speaker Aresimowicz, Senator Duff and Representative Ritter:

Connecticut lawmakers have shown that we can safely get back to work, open our State Capitol and do the people's business in the public eye. Yet when it comes to certain issues, your party continues to work behind closed doors, limiting access and participation in the legislative process.

I want to be clear, informational hearings are not true committee hearings in any sense. They are very limited in the ability to interact with the members of the committee, they are not noticed to the public under the same requirements as official hearings, and the chairperson has extreme if not total unilateral control over who speaks and for how long. That control includes power over the participation of committee members. Therefore, I am requesting that the upcoming votes on six allocation plans before the Public Health, Appropriations and Human Services committees take place at the State Capitol complex, and that we make every effort to get back to work in the building to increase accessibility and transparency.

The State Capitol is the people's building, not a virtual building. I am writing to you today not only as the Senate Republican Leader but also as a member of the public, to question why you continue to refuse to open the legislative process to the public by holding legislative meetings, hearings and other events to give all lawmakers and the people we represent a voice in the Capitol. Lawmakers need to take government back and get to work in full sunlight to help our constituents through these tough times. We cannot abrogate our responsibility to the executive branch and hide behind Zoom meetings as a substitute for action and claim we have a transparent government.

In July, over 150 lawmakers plus dozens of staff members came to the Capitol to debate and vote on bills in the House of Representatives for nearly 24 hours. The Senate also met last month in the Senate Chamber with all members as well as staff for a special legislative session. When it was time to vote on matters that the majority viewed as politically favorable, you opened the Capitol and took action. However, today Democrat lawmakers

continue to hold much smaller legislative proceedings, including committee meetings, “listening sessions”, voice votes and other legislative events on virtual platforms, refusing to reopen the people's building, thereby limiting full transparency and access. In addition, your caucuses have indicated you are content with allowing the Governor to continue with full emergency powers with no legislative oversight. There has been no interest shown in involving the legislature in the emergency management of the state. Once again, while you have opened our doors when it's politically convenient or favorable for you, you have kept those same doors shut when it comes to making politically difficult decisions.

If it was safe to bring lawmakers together for a meeting last week to discuss the governor's extension of his emergency powers, why are other committee meetings still being held virtually? At the meeting of the public health emergency declaration committee, Democrat leaders talked about the ability to go into a special session at any time to change an executive order. Democrats also highlighted a long list of meetings that are taking place virtually among some members at the Capitol. If you stand by your statements, why are only some legislative events being held at the Capitol complex but others allowed to continue in less than accessible and transparent virtual spaces?

The Speaker of the House has also made it clear that he believes, and I agree with him, that we have reached a point where it is safe for high school football to take place in the fall. A special session is also being planned for September around the same time a vote is anticipated on the six allocation plans. If it is safe for young athletes to play football, and safe to hold a full session of the legislature with hundreds of people in the building, it would be inconsistent to argue it's not safe to hold a smaller allocation plan meeting and votes in person.

I expressed my concerns over the block grant allocation plan votes that took place last month, but agreed to let the committees try the virtual voting process as long as it was clear it was not intended to set a precedent. If you watched that vote perhaps you now understand my concern for the chaos and lack of clarity associated with virtual votes. I understand that even a Democrat co-chair of one of the committees made a statement during the meeting's technical issues stating that there's clearly a reason why votes should be held in person. If you have watched any other meetings you will also notice lawmakers being cut off quite frequently, limiting conversation and debate. Yet we continue to see listening sessions and legislative events being scheduled to take place via virtual channels only and issues arising. For example, a listening session was held by three committees last week and multiple lawmakers including myself were not sent correct log in information and could not access the session and participate in the conversation. I want to be clear for the record our caucus does not recognize any of these “meetings” as meeting the spirit of the public hearing requirements of the “People’s Building.”

Virtual meetings also do not take into account those who do not have access to technology to participate. Not everyone has a computer or internet access. Many who do have a computer may share that device with multiple people in their household, including children engaging in digital learning, and therefore may not be able to access a legislative conversation.

When the Capitol is open and lawmakers are working in the building, the public has unique access to be a part of the legislative process. They can stand outside our doors holding a sign or speak about a message that can reach a far greater number of us in one instant than any virtual communication.

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At a time when we are sending children back to schools and advocating for fall high school sports, when businesses have safely been reopened for many months, and when we have gathered the full legislature in the Capitol building for hours when it suited your desires, why are we not holding legislative meetings in the building and getting back to work in a fully transparent and accessible manner?

Why are you abrogating your responsibility on difficult issues, hiding behind the excuse of public health, but disregarding that same argument when you want to vote on a bill that politically benefits you?

We need to take government back and fulfill our responsibility to represent the people we serve. The public deserves far greater transparency and accessibility to the legislative process.

Sincerely,



Len Fasano
Senate Republican Leader

cc: Themis Klarides, House Republican Leader