



CITY OF BOSTON IN CITY COUNCIL

ORDER FOR A HEARING TO BRING CITY OF BOSTON BOARD MEETINGS, ABUTTERS MEETINGS, CITY COUNCIL MEETINGS, AND RELATED BUSINESS BACK IN PERSON WITH A HYBRID OPTION FOR ACCESSIBILITY

- WHEREAS:** Downtown Boston is an important economic driver of our city, state, and regional economy. Over the past three years, many of Boston's neighborhoods, especially those in the Downtown area, have been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Small businesses such as restaurants, bars, cafes and shops suffered from the lack of foot traffic and clientele, and many have had to shut down; *and*
- WHEREAS:** Although many Boston neighborhoods are now on a steady path to reaching pre-pandemic levels of foot traffic and business, the Downtown Crossing and the Financial District in Boston still trail behind the Back Bay and the South Boston Waterfront neighborhoods in its economic recovery; *and*
- WHEREAS:** According to a recent BPDA market analysis, the Financial District is the largest office submarket in Boston by a substantial margin, with 445 office buildings compared to 178 in Back Bay and 94 in the South Boston Waterfront. 91 percent of building stock in the Financial District are marked as office use. A report from January highlighted that foot traffic in the Financial District is still a third below pre-pandemic levels, and the office vacancy rate was at 20.4 percent; *and*
- WHEREAS:** Other reports noted that tech companies are terminating their leases five years early and that the city's vacancy rate has matched Great Recession levels of 18.8%, while also highlighting 3.4 million square feet of negative net absorption in the first quarter of this year, marking the fourth consecutive quarter of companies putting space back on the market; *and*
- WHEREAS:** In the past several weeks, commercial real estate executives in Boston have also expressed serious concerns about the future of the city's office space, and asked for assistance from local, state, and federal officials to play a key role in helping to bring more workers and foot traffic back Downtown; *and*
- WHEREAS:** Last October, under Mayor Wu's leadership, the city offered recommendations and reintroduced PLAN:DOWNTOWN to help revitalize activity and foot traffic, from identifying empty storefronts as pop-ups, outreaching to firms to help them locate in Downtown, expanding housing options in the area, and funding new events and programming, amongst others. Downtown residents, businesses and city officials all agree that higher foot traffic and healthy economic activity is much needed to restore confidence and improve public safety in the neighborhood; *and*

WHEREAS: When COVID-19 first hit Massachusetts in March 2020, Governor Charlie Baker issued an Executive Order suspending certain provisions of the Open Meeting Law, which enabled public bodies to hold meetings remotely without a quorum of the public body physically present at a meeting location, and to provide "adequate, alternative" access to remote meetings. This order has been extended a number of times over the past three years, with the most recent extension on March 29, 2023, when Governor Maura Healey signed into law a supplemental budget bill which extends the temporary provisions pertaining to the Open Meeting Law to March 31, 2025; *and*

WHEREAS: While this policy allows for public bodies to continue holding meetings remotely and grants greater flexibility to both public bodies and members of the public, it is important that as City and Elected Officials that we make a deliberate and conscious effort to encourage City of Boston meetings to return to in-person, with a remote option to keep accessibility in mind, as a step to lend support to our local small businesses, restaurants, and coffee shops that were devastated during the pandemic; *and*

WHEREAS: City Council Meetings, Office of Neighborhood Services abutters meetings, Board members of biweekly and monthly public meetings such as Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA), Zoning Board Subcommittee, Licensing Board, Boston Cannabis Board (BCB), Boston Planning Development Agency (BPDA) Board Meetings, Public Improvement Commission (PIC) Board meetings, as well as City Hall staff, proponents, attorneys, and interested members of the public should conduct meetings back in person, while we continue to provide a hybrid option for our seniors, persons with disabilities, and those unable to attend in person to watch the proceedings and participate; *and*

WHEREAS: Over the course of the last three years, members of the public have reported not being able to testify at the remote public meetings either due to technical errors, or that they were not called upon despite indicating that they wish to speak. It is important for voices of those who wish to testify be heard, and coming back in-person will facilitate this process; *and*

WHEREAS: As Elected Officials of the City of Boston, we need to do all that we can to support our small businesses, restaurants, coffee shops in Downtown and the Financial District to get foot traffic back into the heart of Boston. The economic vitality of our Downtown neighborhoods is vital to our City and the region as a whole; *and*

NOW THEREFORE BE IT ORDERED:

That the appropriate Committee of the Boston City Council holds a hearing to discuss bringing Board Meetings and related City Business back in person in the City of Boston. Representatives from the Zoning Board of Appeals, Licensing Board, Cannabis Board, BPDA, PIC as well as other relevant and interested parties shall be invited to attend.

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