

DRAFT

May 11, 2023

The Honorable Blanca Pacheco
California State Assembly
1021 O Street, Suite 6240
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: AB 817 (PACHECO) LOCAL GOVERNMENT: OPEN MEETINGS – SUPPORT

Dear Assembly member Pacheco:

On behalf of the Lower Russian River Municipal Advisory Council (River MAC) we write to express our strong support for AB 817, which would remove barriers to entry for appointed and elected office by allowing non-decision-making legislative bodies that do not have the ability to take final action to participate in two-way virtual teleconferencing without posting location.

The River MAC is comprised of members from the unincorporated West Sonoma County communities of Forestville, Rio Nido, Guerneville, Monte Rio, Cazadero and Duncans Mills. Challenges associated with recruitment have been attributed to participation time commitments; time and location of meetings; the need to drive after dark and in inclement weather conditions; physical limitation, conflicts with childcare, and work obligations. The COVID-19 global pandemic drove both hyper-awareness and concerns about the spread of infectious diseases, as well as removed barriers to local civic participation by allowing this same remote participation. This enabled individuals who could not otherwise accommodate the time, distance, or mandatory physical participation requirements to engage locally, providing access to leadership opportunities and providing communities with greater diversified input on critical community proposals.

Existing law (Stats. 1991, Ch. 669) requires local bodies to publish and publicly notice opportunities that exist to participate in and serve on local regulatory and advisory boards, commissions, and committees under the Local Appointments List, known as Maddy's Act. However, merely informing the public of the opportunity to engage is not enough: addressing barriers to entry to achieve diverse representation in leadership furthers the Legislature's declared goals of equal access and equal opportunity.

Diversification in civic participation at all levels requires careful consideration of different protected characteristics as well as socio-economic status. The in-person requirement to participate in local governance bodies presents a disproportionate challenge for those with physical or economic limitations, including seniors, persons with disability, single parents and/or caretakers, economically marginalized groups, and those who live in rural areas and face prohibitive driving distances.

Participation in local advisory bodies and appointed boards and commissions often serves as a pipeline to local elected office and opportunities for state and federal leadership positions.

AB 817 would help address these issues by providing a narrow exemption under the Ralph M. Brown Act for non-decision-making legislative bodies that do not take final action on any legislation, regulations, contracts, licenses, permits, or other entitlements, so that equity in opportunity to serve locally and representative diversity in leadership can be achieved.

For these reasons, we are pleased to support AB 817 and thank you for your leadership on this most important issue.

Sincerely,

Pip Marquez de la Plata
Chair, Lower Russian River Municipal Advisory Council

cc: Assemblymember Jim Wood
Senator Mike McGuire
Members and staff, Assembly Local Government Committee
Ronda Paschal, Deputy Legislative Secretary, Governor's Office of Legislative Affairs
Supervisor Lynda Hopkins, Sonoma County Board of Supervisors, 5th District