THE TRANSITION TO DIGITAL MEETINGS IN MIDDLESEX COUNTY
Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge funding from the Government of Ontario and the those who participated in interviews. The views expressed are the authors alone.

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At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments were faced with a myriad of unprecedented challenges. Apart from the urgent need to enact stringent public health and safety measures, meetings of elected officials also had to be held to allow for continuity of government. This case profiles the efforts of Middlesex County, an upper-tier municipal government in Ontario, Canada, to implement digital council, committee, and planning meetings.

Prior to the pandemic, Middlesex County had embarked on a slow, but steady path towards digitization. As a large, rural county that experiences its fair share of inclement weather events, technology is viewed as a way to bridge geographical distances in the community. Earlier efforts to provide councillors with iPads and staff with laptops enhanced digital literacy and allowed most everyone to work remotely when the provincial and municipal emergencies were declared on March 17, 2020. Work on laying the groundwork for digital meetings began immediately as well. County legal staff were lobbying the province for legal clarity at the same time as they worked with staff from IT and the Clerk’s office to develop policies and procedures for digital meetings. The province passed legislation allowing for electronic participation in municipal council, committee, and local board meetings during a declared state of emergency on March 19, 2020. Middlesex County held its first digital council meeting just five days later on March 24th, becoming one of the first municipalities in Ontario to do so.

The main lesson learned from the Middlesex case is that sustained emphasis on digital improvement positions organizations well for the future, no matter what the future may hold. When an unprecedented crisis and a high-level of digital readiness combined to create an opportunity for digital meetings, Middlesex County was at the forefront of the lobbying effort and ready to hit the ground running once the legislative path was clear.
INTRODUCTION

Citizen participation is a hallmark of local democracy. Up until very recently, this participation mainly took place through public, in-person meetings of local governments. However, this centuries old practice was abruptly turned on its head with the global spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in early 2020. The alarming rate of human-to-human transmission of COVID-19 through close and even proximate physical contact caused many jurisdictions across the world to prohibit large gatherings like open public meetings. Despite the spread of the virus, governments of all shapes and sizes still needed to deliver public services and make important policy decisions, prompting many to move to digital meetings of elected representatives. This pivot required ingenuity and collaboration but – as we will see through this case – jurisdictions with a steady, ongoing commitment to digitization had a head start.

This case study profiles the efforts of Middlesex County, an upper-tier municipal government in Ontario, Canada, to rapidly implement digital council, committee, and local board meetings at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Apart from the story of how Middlesex County was able to quickly overcome the technical aspects of transitioning to digital meetings, this case is also about intergovernmental relations and innovation during a crisis. Middlesex County and other municipalities in Ontario were softly lobbying the province to allow for digital participation in meetings prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. These preliminary efforts yielded limited results. COVID-19 opened a policy window for digital meetings out of necessity, but the province has now given municipalities the ability to allow digital participation in meetings outside of a declared public emergency. As this case demonstrates, Middlesex County took advantage of the opportunity presented by the pandemic to implement long-standing plans to further digitize council and committee meetings and strengthen organization-wide digital government initiatives.

This case proceeds in four main sections. First, we provide a brief overview of the shift to digital municipal council meetings in Ontario, as brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, with a specific emphasis on Middlesex County. We then connect to the policy process literature by discussing the policy window concept and the opportunity that the COVID-19 pandemic presented to Middlesex County with respect to digital meetings. Next, we explore, in greater detail, Middlesex County’s longstanding digitization push and how this facilitated the process of rapidly moving to digital council and planning meetings. This section is the longest and most technical of the paper. The final section highlights the main lesson learned from Middlesex County’s experience and concludes the study.
1 COVID-19 AND DIGITAL COUNCIL MEETINGS

Municipalities in Canada receive their authority through provincial legislation. In Ontario, the general enabling legislation is the Municipal Act, 2001.¹ In general, municipal councils and committees meet in person, in a municipal building. The public receives advance notice of meetings and can usually access documentation regarding agenda items in advance. Except when a municipality is considering certain legislatively defined issues, such as legal advice, negotiations with third parties, and labour relations, meetings are open to the public and public delegations are common. The Government of Ontario first permitted limited digital participation in council and committee meetings beginning in 2018 through Bill 68, the Modernizing Ontario’s Municipal Legislation Act. This change allowed for digital participation only during public portions of meetings. Council members participating digitally were also not counted towards quorum. Therefore, while some digital participation in meetings was possible, it could only be an option for a limited number of councillors who could not take part in any of the closed-door portions of the meeting. While some municipalities called for amendments to this legislation to allow for full virtual participation at council meetings, the province resisted and maintained the existing provisions (Morris 2018; Personal Interview: Government Official 3). Then in March 2020, everything changed.

The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020. This declaration, along with a sharp increase in infections around the world, led governments to take immediate action to protect their citizens, including implementing a variety of quarantine procedures designed to isolate individuals and stem infections. For all the challenges COVID-19 posed for municipal governments in Ontario, the pandemic also created an opportunity for the adoption of fully digital council meetings.

In Middlesex County, work from home procedures and social distancing protocols were first implemented on March 16, 2020. Land ambulance and nursing home staff were excluded and a skeleton crew of seven continued to work from County Building, but the vast majority of the County’s workforce was required to work remotely. The following day, March 17, 2020, the province of Ontario

¹The City of Toronto also has its own city charter-like legislation, but the provisions regarding council meetings are similar
declared an emergency under the Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act and issued an order prohibiting organized public events of over 50 people. Middlesex County quickly followed suit and declared an emergency later that same day.

With staff working remotely and in-person council meetings off limits, the County still needed to maintain continuity of government and provide core services. Immediately, Middlesex County began lobbying the Ministry of Municipal Affairs to allow digital participation to count towards quorum and to provide clarity around public participation in digital Planning Act and Drainage Act meetings. On March 19, 2020, the province introduced and passed by unanimous consent, Bill 187, the Municipal Emergency Act, 2020, which included provisions to assist municipalities in responding to adapting to the emergency declaration. This legislation amended the Municipal Act, 2001 and the City of Toronto Act, 2006 to allow municipalities to update their procedural bylaws to permit digital participation in municipal council, committee, and local board meetings to count towards quorum during a declared state of the emergency.
In response to legislative changes, Middlesex County passed a bylaw and resolution to amend its procedural bylaw to allow for digital participation in council, committee, and local board meetings during a declared emergency at a special meeting of council on March 24, 2020. County staff claim they were the first in the province to do so (Personal Interview: Government Official 1). The Ontario legislature later passed Bill 197, COVID-19 Economic Recovery Act, 2020, on July 21, 2020, giving municipalities the option of allowing for digital participation in meetings and proxy voting outside of a declared emergency. Middlesex County promptly passed a bylaw amending its procedural bylaw to permanently allow for digital participation in council meetings on July 28, 2020.

In short, the COVID-19 pandemic, abetted by the lobbying efforts of municipalities, like Middlesex County, pushed the issue of digital municipal council meetings to the top of the province’s agenda. Once the province removed the key restrictions around digital municipal council meetings, it was up to municipalities to make the necessary adjustments. Middlesex County did so very quickly.
Brief moments in time when policy change is possible, like the situation created by COVID-19, are known in the policy process literature as policy windows (Kingdon 2011; Herweg et al. 2018). The policy window concept, most closely associated with the multiple streams approach, is a useful tool for explaining agenda setting. Policy windows can be opened by factors like feedback on existing programs, changes in public opinion, political and administrative transitions, and focusing events; the latter being most important for this case study. Disasters or crises are archetypal focusing events, as they often bring abrupt attention to a multitude of issues. Focusing events that undermine existing beliefs and practices have the potential to bring about significant policy change (Nohrstedt and Weible 2010; Herweg et al. 2018).

COVID-19 is a focusing event like no other as it affects all aspects of society and the economy and is geographically boundless. The list of deeply rooted practices – like public gatherings – called into question by COVID-19 seems endless. The opening of a policy window, even as large as the one forced open by COVID-19, does not guarantee policy change, however. Instances of significant policy change often hinge on the efforts and abilities of policy entrepreneurs, skilled and persistent policy advocates with access to decision makers, to gain political traction around their favoured solution (Kingdon 2011).

Often, members of a policy community have a preferred policy solution at the ready and, once a policy window is open, policy entrepreneurs can go to work. The solution of digital municipal council meetings, however, did not fully materialize until the onset of COVID-19. As the rise of various video conferencing platforms enhanced the feasibility of digital council meetings, the idea began circulating among municipal chief administrative officers (CAOs), clerks, and IT professionals (Personal Interview: Government Official 1). However, the provisions in the Municipal Act and the comfort level of politicians and the public prevented anyone from really pushing hard on the issue (Personal Interview: Government Official 3). But the pandemic and the resultant restrictions on public gatherings
brought the need for virtual meetings into sharp focus. Members of the policy community quickly lined up behind the idea of digital participation in council and committee meetings (Personal Interview: Government Official 1).

In Middlesex County, the idea of allowing for digital participation in council meetings had long been on the minds of a group of administrators. But apart from some informal discussions among themselves and staff at the regional office of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs, no one was really forcing the issue. The likelihood of Middlesex County convincing the province to change the rules on digital meetings seemed slim, so attention was directed to more achievable digitization initiatives. However, once restrictions on public gatherings were put in place beginning in March 2020, the need for provisions for digital council meetings took on increasing urgency. Because of its earlier digitization efforts, Middlesex County was immediately on top of the issue.
On the surface, Middlesex County’s transition to digital meetings seemed abrupt, but most of the groundwork had already been laid through various digitization initiatives. Although digital meetings were not an immediate priority for council and administration prior to the pandemic, the existing digital infrastructure and comfort level with technology paved the way once the legislative path was cleared. So, while the adoption of Middlesex County’s digital policy was rapid, the speed at which it was implemented was made possible by a preceding series of incremental innovations.

What explains Middlesex County’s long-standing preoccupation with digitization? Geography and climate were two main influencing factors (Personal Interview: Government Official 1). Middlesex County has a population of 71,555 spread over 3,317 square kilometres. The County’s expansive territory is dotted with several built-up urban areas, but much of the landscape is rural. The geographic location of the separated City of London complicates matters further. The County’s second and third largest lower-tier municipalities by population surround the city on three sides: Middlesex Centre to the west and the north and Thames Centre to the east. The County’s most populous municipality, Strathroy-Caradoc, is to the west of Middlesex Centre, such that London creates a geographic gulf between Strathroy-Caradoc and a sliver of Middlesex Centre on the one side and Thames Centre on the other. The County Building is also located in downtown London, which poses challenges for those travelling from some areas of the County. According to Google Maps, for example, the quickest routes from the administrative offices in both Southwest Middlesex and North Middlesex to the County Building are just shy of 50 kilometres.

Being in southwestern Ontario, the County also experiences inclement weather events throughout the year. Having staff and councillors on the road during these events prolongs travel times and creates liability issues for the County. On top of the driving hazards, the County is also looking for ways to reduce the carbon footprint and increase the sustainability of municipal operations.
Increasing digital literacy and creating opportunities for remote work are viewed by many within the organization as a solution to these perennial challenges. The County also provides information technology services to all its lower-tier municipalities, so the benefits of any improvements are widely dispersed. Council was openly supportive of staff efforts to modernize IT infrastructure and gradually introduce new technology to the County’s operations (Personal Interview: Government Official 4). Admittedly, Council did not have the technical understanding required to direct these efforts and, therefore, trusted staff to make the appropriate interventions on their behalf, as long as their efforts had the goal of making the County more sophisticated and efficient (Personal Interview: Government Official 4). For the most part, Council also did not wish to be seen publicly leading efforts to purchase or invest in new technology out of a fear that voters may see this as largesse (Personal Interview: Government Official 4). Therefore, County staff were given leeway to make digitization efforts a priority.

Gradually, over time, the IT department and the CAO’s office took steps to embed a digital culture where possible throughout the organization. Two key outputs of these efforts were the provision of iPads for councillors and laptops for staff. Equipping councillors with iPads helped to increase their digital literacy and allowed staff to move to digital documents for council meetings (Personal Interview: Government Official 1). Purchasing laptops for staff, as legacy hardware came up for renewal, allowed for remote work if the opportunity presented itself. Indeed, when COVID-19 struck, the IT department intensified its desktop replacement efforts, immediately purchasing the twenty remaining needed laptops (Personal Interview: Government Official 1).

Though a longstanding goal of many senior administrators, the idea of digital council and committee meetings was, for the most part, left to simmer on the back burner as these more tractable projects were pursued. The issue emerged and receded from the County policy agenda for years. There were informal discussions, and exploratory calls were made to the regional service office of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs, but the file often took a backseat to other pressing County matters (Personal Interview: Government Official 1). Ultimately, staff were reluctant to fully commit to exploring the logistics of expanded digital participation in council meetings given legislative restrictions. Instead, they focused on improving the digital literacy of council members and investing in technology.
3.1 BUILDING A LOCAL VIRTUAL MEETING STRATEGY

The long-term digitization plan that staff had in place was disrupted – as was everything else – by COVID-19. By the time the COVID-19 outbreak took hold, and lockdowns were ordered by the provincial government, Middlesex County IT staff had invested nearly 7 years into their incremental digitization planning (Personal Interview: Government Official 1). COVID-19 accelerated this planning process. Continuity of government was the top priority in the days immediately following the virus outbreak. This continuity included ensuring not only that council could meet virtually, but also that staff could work comfortably from their homes or other remote locations without gathering at the County buildings. The quick purchase of the twenty laptops mentioned above helped accomplish the latter.

With staff able to work from home, the next task was to find ways for council, and eventually other committees, to meet virtually. Even though the County had a clear need and IT staff believed they could implement a virtual meeting strategy relatively quickly, a legal solution needed to be found to allow council to have a fully interactive meeting online (Personal Interview: Government Official 2). As mentioned above, the then-conditions in the Municipal Act allowed a municipality to have some members of council attend meetings virtually, but their attendance would not count toward quorum and they could not participate in closed sessions. These requirements needed to change if Middlesex County was to have fully interactive, virtual council meetings.
Without a clear legislative path to hosting virtual council meetings, the CAO engaged legal staff to explore existing possibilities under the Municipal Act (Personal Interview: Government Official 5). Finding none, legal staff reached out to the Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MMAH) for guidance. After MMAH staff were unable to provide a satisfactory route for hosting virtual council meetings, County legal staff asked for a legislative amendment to the Municipal Act. Joining other municipalities and municipal associations in Ontario, Middlesex County applied pressure on the province to act (Personal Interview: Government Official 5).

While the legal department was lobbying for a legislative amendment to clear a procedural path to hosting digital council meetings, the IT department began exploring digital platforms to conduct meetings. Three main platforms were evaluated: CISCO Webex, Zoom Meetings and Microsoft Teams. The IT team assigned a score of 1, 2 or 3 along six dimensions: overall features, cost effectiveness, technology integration, ease of use, ease of transition, and security. The evaluation criteria are presented below.

**OVERALL FEATURES:**

The feature-set of the platform selected for hosting virtual meetings had to mimic existing in-person council meetings as much as possible, such as isolating individual speakers, muting all microphones, raising hands and sharing content. The software would also need to integrate with streaming services, such as YouTube, to ensure an open and transparent process for residents who would normally be allowed to attend in person.

1. Contains the bare minimum features in order to be an effective platform for this use
2. Contains some of the features required to be an effective platform for this use
3. Contains most/all of the features required to be an effective platform for this use
COST EFFECTIVENESS:

The cost of the system was another key decision point, given the pandemic was expected to place the County into a difficult financial position. The value of the software based on the features provided, combined with support hours required, setup time, and ongoing maintenance, was evaluated. A high value proposition would mean that once the platform had been put in place, digital council meetings would run similar to in-person meetings and with minimal IT support.

1. Low value proposition, based on overall cost versus features, ease of use, integration, etc.
2. Medium value proposition, based on overall cost versus features, ease of use, integration, etc.
3. High value proposition, based on overall cost versus features, ease of use, integration, etc.

TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION:

Middlesex County employs a wide range of hardware and software, including Windows and Macintosh laptops and desktops. All councillors were previously provided with iPads for use during council sessions. One of the major contributing factors in choosing digital meeting software was iOS integration to ensure that all councillors were able to attend meetings using their iPads.

1. Does not integrate into existing technology without significant effort and/or cost
2. Integrates well into existing technology with some effort and/or cost
3. Seamlessly integrates into existing technology with minimal effort and cost
EASE OF USE:

Staff knew that the transition from in-person council meetings to digital meetings would need to happen quickly and be facilitated remotely. Meaning that the proposed solution needed to be easy to use, reliable and compatible with different devices and operating systems.

1. Councillors/Staff/Administrators find using the software difficult without significant training and support
2. Councillors/Staff/Administrators find the software difficult to use but are able to adapt over time with support and training
3. Councillors/Staff/Administrators are able to grasp core concepts after minimal training/support

EASE OF TRANSITION:

It was identified early on that focus had to be placed on making an online council session feel as natural and familiar as in-person council meetings. Councillors and administrators stressed the importance of following the natural flow and order of council. Any proposed solution needed to be implemented in such a way that the transition did not cause any disruption to regular council sessions.

1. Difficult transition period, alternate technologies needed as a stand-by”
2. Some transitionary issues, generally able to get-by with minimal issues
3. Fast transition period, able to ramp up quickly and effectively

SECURITY:

It is very important to take security into account when transitioning to an online platform. Ensuring that meetings are secure to prevent malicious actions by third parties was a factor from the very beginning of the selection process. In addition, solutions should be “pre-hardened,” so that obscure security features are already selected by default and not accidentally left disabled.
Missing significant security features, or significant configuration required “out of box”

2. Generally secure, requires some configuration to ensure secure

3. Hardened during setup – minimal/no security concerns

Using the criteria above, the IT team affixed a score for each category and created the follow evaluation matrix:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Cisco Webex</th>
<th>Zoom Meetings</th>
<th>Microsoft Teams</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall Features</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost Effectiveness</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology Integration</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease of Use</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease of Transition</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall Score</strong></td>
<td><strong>13</strong></td>
<td><strong>17</strong></td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the end, Zoom was selected as the chosen technology solution. Microsoft Teams was dismissed first, as it was not supported on iPads. Since councillors were provided with iPads prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, they had grown used to them and many reported preferring the iPads to paper copies of the meeting agendas (Personal Interview: Government Official 1). For many councillors, the iPads were a critical piece of technology that would allow them to connect to the virtual meetings. Staff were acutely aware that they were serving two audiences with their efforts: the public and members of council. Councillors needed to feel comfortable with the technology for the virtual meetings to have success. Finding a solution that would allow councillors to continue to use their iPads was paramount.
CISCO Webex was a strong contender, as it had most of the features available that the team required, but it was eventually dismissed as well, in favour of Zoom. For the IT team, Webex failed in reliability and scale. During initial testing, Webex was unable to support small department-level meetings without disruption or disconnection. Fear, therefore, grew that it may be unreliable in a virtual council meeting where they would be possibly dozens of more connections.

The IT team did hold some reservations about Zoom’s security features early on. As the pandemic wore on and more people were using Zoom, “Zoom-bombing,” where malicious third-parties would log on to private conversations, became frequent. The solution for the IT team was to implement a forced password policy, where all managed Zoom meetings required passwords and waiting rooms to manage attendees and limit the risk of “Zoom bombing.” In the end, Zoom proved to be reliable, intuitive and supported on the majority of devices used by council and staff.

With a platform in place, IT staff still needed to wait for a legal green light to host virtual council meetings. Progress was being made on this front as well. The province’s declaration of a state of emergency on March 17, 2020 cleared the way for a range of legislative amendments to various provincial acts, one of which allowed for virtual council meetings. While permission was granted from the province, there was no meaningful direction on how to proceed locally, meaning the County legal department needed to draft a novel procedure which met the openness and transparency requirements of the Municipal Act. Once the procedure was drafted, IT staff and council moved quickly, hosting a test run of a meeting of council later that day on March 17, 2020. This test ensured the technology worked well and supported the necessary functions of a council meeting. The provincial legislation was formally passed on March 19th, and Middlesex County’s first full meeting of County council occurred shortly after on March 24, 2020. At this first meeting, the County’s procedural bylaw was updated to allow for virtual meetings (Personal Interview: Government Official 4).
3.2 DIGITAL COUNCIL MEETINGS IN PRACTICE

Much like physical council meetings, the public cannot participate unless specifically called upon. Council meetings in Middlesex County traditionally had very low attendance when held in-person. The odd exception to this pattern was if a controversial policy was being decided. The IT department connected the Zoom meetings to YouTube so the public could watch live and recorded sessions of council. Table 2, below, includes viewership statistics from March until July 2020.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meeting Date</th>
<th>On-Demand Views</th>
<th>Live Views</th>
<th>Watch Time (Hours)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 24, 2020</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>43.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 14, 2020</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>44.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 12, 2020</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 15, 2020**</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 26, 2020</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 9, 2020</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>12.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 23, 2020</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 14, 2020 (Pt.1)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 14, 2020 (Pt.2)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 28, 2020**</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Statistics as of August 5, 2020
**Denotes special meeting of council

Viewership spiked at first but has waned over time. Staff account for this early interest in the pandemic – namely people wanted to see how their local government was responding – and the general novelty of being able to view council meetings remotely for the first time (Personal Interview: Government Official 3). There is also a belief that other municipalities were viewing the meeting, given that Middlesex County was first to have a digital council meeting in Ontario.
Others, it is believed, likely wanted to see how the meeting unfolded and learn how they too could host virtual meetings of council.

For the most part, the largest challenges encountered hosting virtual council meetings involved connection issues. Middlesex County is quite rural and, as a result, has inconsistent broadband access in certain locations. Some councillors simply did not have good enough internet access to sustain a connection throughout an entire council meeting (Personal Interview: Government Official 1). In response, some councillors needed to contact their internet service provider to upgrade their service (Personal Interview: Government Official 3). Others logged on to meetings from their local townhalls or at libraries (Personal Interview: Government Official 4).

On the whole, councillors adapted well to the virtual meetings. As the primary participants, the comfort and connection for members of council was important. The basics of meetings have been accomplished: members are able to see and hear each other and deliberate and debate on important issues for the County. The business of government has proceeded. What is missing are the informal elements of in-person meetings. Council members tend to agree there is benefit to being in the same room and being able to properly read the body language of other members or being able to have a side conversation in the hall prior to voting on a particular matter (Personal Interview: Government Official 4). There is a tradition on County council to have lunch prior to a council meeting, which allows the councillors to discuss matters affecting the County (Personal Interview: Government Official 4). This tradition obviously cannot happen during an era of virtual meetings, but members of council have compensated by having more individual conversations prior to meetings. It is not uncommon now for a series of phone conversations to occur before each meeting, as councillors informally discuss matters soon coming before council (Personal Interview: Government Official 4). Staff also began the practice of opening each meeting 30 minutes before the scheduled start time to allow councillors to talk amongst themselves while waiting for the meeting to begin (Personal Interview: Government official 4).
INTRODUCING VIRTUAL PLANNING MEETINGS

Planning meetings created a much different challenge for Middlesex County. Traditionally at a planning meeting, development plans would be presented and members of the public would be invited to comment or provide context on the development from their perspective. COVID-19, of course, hampered any type of in-person meeting, but the County was unable to stop all planning meetings.

Unlike changes to the Municipal Act, there were no subsequent changes to the Planning Act to explicitly allow virtual meetings. In response, the County’s legal department advised lower-tier municipalities in the County that the best course of action to protect themselves from judicial review was to ensure that the virtual planning meetings look and feel as much as possible like in-person public meetings (Personal Interview: Government Official 5). County legal staff drafted a novel procedure to achieve just that. The main takeaway for this approach was to ensure that everyone who wanted to speak on a certain planning matter was able to and that no one could reasonably argue they were denied an avenue to fully participate in the meeting. Given the virtual constraints, this task was not easy.

From March 16th to May 21st, the planning department examined different routes to have public participation in a virtual committee of adjustment and planning committee meeting (Personal Interview: Government Official 4). Working closely with the IT department, Zoom was again selected as the virtual platform for planning meetings. Zoom had the same high-level functionality that was prized for council meetings, but was also useful for managing a variety of speakers who would need the ability to enter and exit on-demand. Given some of the challenges with rural broadband in the County, the platform also needed a call-in feature where those hoping to speak would be able to use their telephone to join the meeting. Zoom had this functionality and provided some relief for those in the County who feared that those limited by their broadband access would have grounds to appeal a meeting if they were unable to join a video conference (Personal Interview: Government Official 5). The first virtual planning meeting took place on May 21st.
There is a statutory requirement to provide public notice of planning meetings. With virtual meetings, this requirement is still followed, but on the notice for the meeting, the public is asked to contact the Clerk’s office, which provides them with a link to the virtual meeting. When members of the public log on they are ushered to a waiting room until the meeting begins. At this point, they can see and hear the meeting, but they cannot speak. The Chair will list the people who requested a link and they will be brought into the meeting and unmuted. A planner will do a presentation on the matter before the committee, and the Chair will then see who is indicating they wish to speak. Members of the public can indicate an interest in speaking by either raising their hand on camera, using a raised hand feature graphic on Zoom or writing their intention in a chat box on the platform. The Chair will recognize each individual and make a list of speakers. At the conclusion of the meeting, everyone who has not spoken is asked directly if they wish to speak. After everyone has an opportunity to speak, a vote is called and the public is placed back into the waiting room, where they can watch any other component of the meeting. The next group that is present for the subsequent planning matter is then brought into the meeting, and the process repeats itself.

In the end, the County administration felt there was little else they could do to make the virtual planning meetings feel more like in-person meetings (Personal Interview: Government Official 5). Since the beginning of virtual planning meetings, the County has adopted a service pledge that if someone wants to attend or speak at a meeting, they will find a way to make it happen, regardless of personal bandwidth limitations. County staff had also set up practice sessions for those unfamiliar with Zoom to ensure they understand how to connect and present at meetings. Thus far, the system has worked well, with only minor technical problems (such as a lost connection) or procedural challenges (e.g., someone speaking to the wrong issue by mistake).
COVID-19 has disrupted virtually every aspect of our lives. This disruption naturally extends to governments. In the face of restrictions on gatherings to control the virus, governments at all levels still needed to find ways to make decisions and deliver services to the public. At the early stages of the pandemic, governments needed to act swiftly and decisively to support their residents through an unpredictable and trying time. This case study deals with the move to digital municipal council and committee meetings in Ontario. As soon as the provincial government amended regulations to allow for the full participation of members in digital meetings, municipalities reacted quickly to ensure their councils could meet. No municipality in Ontario reacted quicker than Middlesex County. Within days of the provincial legislative change, Middlesex County had revised its procedural bylaw and had digital meetings up and running.

What can we learn from the Middlesex County experience? The main takeaway relates to the prior work on digitization that County staff had initiated. Slow and steady progress was being made towards digitization before the pandemic struck. These sustained efforts can be attributed to innovative and skilled staff committed to moving digital adoption forward and a supportive council that was keen to incrementally incorporate technology into the County’s operations. The idea of digital council meetings was also circulating as a potential solution to perennial challenges created by the County’s geography and climate. At the time, however, the idea was a non-starter, mainly because of restrictions in the Municipal Act. County staff broached the idea with local ministry staff, the reception was lukewarm and the County was not prepared to push too hard. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic opened a policy window that pushed digital council meetings to the top of the province’s agenda. Right away, County staff were urging the province to lift the necessary restrictions, which it very quickly did. At that point, County offices were closed, and staff were working remotely. Councillors had iPads and were used to using them during council meetings. Staff had already settled on Zoom as the most appropriate technology solution and after working out some security and procedural issues were ready to facilitate virtual council meetings that very closely approximated in-person meetings.
This case highlights a unique tension in local government: municipalities, because of their scale, ought to be able to be nimble and positioned to react swiftly to challenges, but are often hamstrung by provincial authority and various resource constraints. Nonetheless, municipalities remain an important site for digital products to be tested and implemented in ways in which other governments struggle.

While it may seem unexciting, Middlesex County demonstrates a key lesson for public sector leaders: digitization is an ongoing process and in many cases the work put in today may not be immediately realized. A strong and consistent focus on digital improvement, however, positions organizations well when opportunity or emergency strike. Likewise, it sometimes takes a crisis before a solution to a nagging and persistent problem fully materializes. When opportunity and preparation aligned, Middlesex County found itself at the forefront of virtual council meetings in Ontario and more prepared to provide continuity of government than many of its peers.


## APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW LISTING

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<th>Participant</th>
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<td>July 31, 2020</td>
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<td>August 14, 2020</td>
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THE TRANSITION TO DIGITAL MEETINGS IN MIDDLESEX COUNTY