

Session committee meetings to go virtual after virus spike

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Amid concerns over the spread of COVID-19 and the thousands of new cases being reported daily, the New Mexico House of Representatives will hold virtual committee meetings during the 30-day legislative session that begins Tuesday, House Speaker Brian Egolf said Thursday.

House floor sessions will be in person, though members who contract COVID-19 or are at high risk will have the option to participate remotely, he said.

“The public will have access to the building,” said Egolf, a Santa Fe Democrat, referring to the state Capitol.

During the 60-day session last year, the building was closed to the usual crowds of residents, lobbyists and special interest groups — due to both public health concerns from the ongoing pandemic and as a safeguard against any potential acts of violence following the Jan. 6 U.S. Capitol uprising. The closure, which included chain-link fencing around the Capitol, sparked stiff opposition and complaints from Republicans.

Egolf said members of the public will be able to testify in the virtual committee meetings from inside the Roundhouse.

“I don’t know if we’re going to be able to pull this off on Tuesday, but the goal is to have some sort of AV systems so that if someone is in the building and wants to testify to a committee ... there will be a camera and a microphone.”

The rules for the Senate have not yet been determined.

The Senate Rules Committee is scheduled to discuss that chamber's COVID-19 policies Friday, said Chris Nordstrom, a spokesman for the Senate Democratic Caucus.

“We don't know yet how things are going to work for the Senate,” he said. “The Senate Rules Committee will be discussing Senate rules changes as it relates to COVID and then those rules will have to be voted in and adopted by the full Senate once we're in session.”

Nordstrom said the purpose of Friday's meeting is to solicit input and ideas from lawmakers.

“The main thing I think they'll be looking at is to ensure that legislators can participate in the process in a way that keeps them and everybody else safe,” he said. “That could mean Zooming in from their office. That's one of things we did last year. They had to be in the building, but they could Zoom in from their office.”

Nordstrom said the committee also will discuss how to accommodate a senator who contracts the virus.

“I think they'll be looking at options for more remote participation, but the details of that still have to be worked out,” he said.

It remains unclear whether Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham will deliver her annual State of the State address in person before members of the House and Senate and a crowd of spectators, as has been the tradition, or whether she would provide a virtual speech when the session opens next week. Her office has yet to announce Lujan Grisham's plans for the address.

The governor's press secretary, Nora Meyers Sackett, said earlier this week that additional information would be forthcoming, “but we will be amending the set up to take public health into account.”