

ICANN82 SOAC CHAIRS ROUNDTABLE (Seattle, Washington, USA; 7 March 2025)

SUMMARY & STATUS OF WORK FOR THE "HOW WE MEET" PROJECT

FRAMING THE ISSUE:

This paper summarizes the background to the How We Meet project that the ICANN organization is working on with the community, about how to optimize the effectiveness and efficiency of ICANN's hybrid Public Meetings to advance community work priorities while ensuring that resources are allocated appropriately and prudently. This paper describes the origin and scope of the project and includes an update on the options under discussion that will be presented during the plenary session at ICANN82.

There have been many geopolitical and social changes since the Board adopted the current [2014 ICANN Public Meetings Strategy](#) over ten years ago. Post-pandemic, the cost of conducting an ICANN Public Meeting has also increased significantly, particularly in relation to travel. Following initial discussions at ICANN80 in Kigali, the leaders of ICANN's seven Supporting Organizations and Advisory Committees (SOACs) agreed that it will be helpful to have a fuller dialogue to assess the way that the 2014 ICANN Public Meetings strategy is being implemented, in view of these changes as well as evolving community needs.

At the ICANN81 SOAC Chairs Roundtable in Istanbul, the SOAC Chairs discussed a lightweight and nimble approach where a small group of experienced community members would work with ICANN staff to consider a list of options to be presented to the community for input. The SOAC Chairs also requested that ICANN develop a project charter as well as an initial document with a list of ideas to frame the group's discussions.

The project charter describes the purpose of the How We Meet project as creating a community group to be tasked with *"[assessing] the current implementation of the ICANN Meetings Strategy and [developing] practical proposals for updating how ICANN Public Meetings are organized, conducted, and evaluated. These proposals will be the foundation for broader community consultations, including Public Comment opportunities, that are intended to lead ultimately to concrete, community-agreed recommendations aimed at enhancing the cost-efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability of ICANN Public Meetings."*

SUMMARY OF THE PROJECT & STATUS OF WORK:

The How We Meet discussion group began its work in January 2025 and has been meeting weekly to consider the ideas contained in the document that ICANN staff had drafted at the request of the SOAC Chairs. The ideas listed in this "straw man" document were based on community discussions to date as well as additional feedback received from several community groups following the ICANN80 meeting. The list was intended to provide operational insights into what it takes to plan and execute a typical ICANN Public Meeting, to inform the community

discussion group as it discussed the feasibility and potential impacts of changes to different aspects of an ICANN Public Meeting, from cost considerations and efficiency gains to venue-related factors.

What is the scope of the project?

The project charter highlighted the following assumptions for the project: (1) ICANN Public Meetings are a significant portion of the operational budget (~US\$14 million annually); (2) ICANN's hybrid meeting capabilities are effective and enable broad-based remote participation without significantly reducing in-person attendance; and (3) The community values a mix of in-person and virtual meetings, though the appropriate balance between the two is not currently clear.

The "straw man" document sets out the following Problem Statement:

As the ICANN community's structures, membership, decision making processes, and policy priorities continue to evolve, and in view of the current financial constraints impacting the resources available to carry out ICANN's mission:

- 1. What do we need to change about how we plan, organize, conduct, and evaluate the three ICANN Public Meetings we have each year to ensure that we optimize these hybrid opportunities?*
 - More specifically, what changes, updates, and improvements do we need to make to ICANN Public Meetings that entail meaningful cost savings while continuing to advance ICANN's mission to coordinate the development and implementation of policies through a bottom-up consensus-based multistakeholder process and ensure the stable and secure operation of the Internet's unique identifier systems?*
- 2. How can we achieve these changes, updates, and improvements?*
 - More specifically, what are practical, implementable measures we can take, what should we prioritize, and what metrics can we use to assess their utility and effectiveness?*
 - In particular, how will the work being planned as part of ICANN's next Five Year Strategic and Operating Plan - to improve how ICANN Hybrid Meetings advance policy and advice development work - impact the recommendations from this project and vice versa?*

What is the project timeline?

The project charter acknowledges that the timeline is tight, with the group aiming to present options to the broader community at ICANN82 and, following a full Public Comment period, completing any final proposals by ICANN83. This timeline allows for any proposed changes and implementation work to be considered when the FY27 budget cycle begins.

Who is participating in the discussion group?

The SOAC Chairs agreed that for this work it was appropriate to convene a small group of community members who are interested in the topic and experienced in planning and attending hybrid meetings. The SOAC Chairs also agreed that, while it was important that members be drawn from across the community, the group need not be fully representative of the community. As it turns out, the group includes participants from the ALAC, GAC, RSSAC,

SSAC, ccNSO and GNSO. Given the nature of the work, the SOAC Chairs agreed that it would be important to have qualified ICANN staff join the group as active participants, from the Global Stakeholder Engagement, Language Services, Meetings, Meetings Technical Services, and Policy teams.

What options were discussed and what will be presented to the community for its input?

The list of ideas in the “straw man” document covered topics such as the location, rotation and duration of ICANN Public Meetings, their format and objectives, travel-related matters, and sources of funding. For each proposal, ICANN staff estimated: (1) the level of effort that will be required to implement changes; (2) the potential impact on the community’s meeting experience; and (3) whether it aligns with the 2014 Meetings Strategy. Staff also shared specific data on the historic and current cost of an ICANN Public Meeting and provided information on the cost savings and other impacts of each proposal. For transparency, these materials will be published on a community wiki page, along with the recordings of the group’s discussions.

The ICANN82 plenary session is expected to highlight the following options for community feedback:

- Meeting Structure & Duration: maintain the current objectives of each of the three ICANN Public Meetings but reduce the six-day Community Forum by one day. This is expected to result in substantial cost savings of approximately US\$460,000, though it will mean revising the current schedule to maximize the meeting venue and potentially tasking the community-based meetings planning group to develop clearer criteria for requesting and approving sessions at future meetings.
- Meeting Rotation: maintain the objective of rotating ICANN Public Meetings through the five global regions, but aim to select locations well in advance, prioritize locations which offer economical travel, accommodation and venue options, and where feasible return to previous locations to leverage multi-year contracts.
- Moving to More Virtual Meetings: The group discussed but did not arrive at a definitive proposal for moving at least one of the three ICANN Public Meetings to be wholly virtual. Instead, the group explored several options to solicit community feedback on, such as:
 - (1) conducting a virtual meeting every few (e.g., fourth, fifth or sixth) meeting;
 - (2) introducing an additional (fourth) virtual-only meeting each year as a pilot program;
 - (3) adopting a hybrid meeting formats where attendees gather in a single location for networking while sessions remain virtual; and
 - (4) establishing a policy to automatically take a meeting virtual if there is a need to move out of a particular venue at late notice, to minimize the highly significant cost of a last-minute relocation.
- Exploring a More Robust Financial Strategy: the group agreed that there is a need for a comprehensive sponsorship strategy that would facilitate financial sustainability without shifting costs to attendees and acknowledged the ongoing work by the ICANN organization in this area. The group also agreed that it would be worthwhile to consider reducing the number of networking receptions where no external sponsor is available,

thereby reducing meeting costs by an estimated US\$365,000 annually. In this regard, while the group discussed the feasibility of imposing a conference registration fee, it acknowledged that ICANN is not currently set up to process these payments and agreed to put forward the idea to the community for its feedback.

The community participants in the discussion group also acknowledged the ongoing work by the ICANN organization to reduce the number of staff traveling to ICANN Public Meetings as well as to streamline its live interpretation services to match actual demand. Finally, the group discussed but decided not to proceed further with proposals to revisit how funded community travel slots are allocated (as being out of scope for the project) and reduce inter-sessional standalone meetings (as this would require feasibility assessments beyond the scope of this project).

What are the next steps for the project?

After ICANN82 concludes, the discussion group will prepare an initial report for Public Comment, following which the group will consider all feedback received for possible incorporation into and revisions of its earlier report. The group is aiming to complete its final report by ICANN83 in June 2025.

As this discussion group was formed to collaborate with the ICANN organization to refine options to be presented to the community for its input, it was considered critical that the group's initial output be published for a full Public Comment period in accordance with ICANN's usual practice.