



City of Palo Alto

COLLEAGUES MEMO

DATE: February 24, 2020

TO: City Council Members

FROM: Council Member Cormack, Council Member DuBois

SUBJECT: Update From the Ad hoc Committee (Vice Mayor Dubois and Council Member Cormack) on Boards and Commissions and Potential Next Steps

The ad hoc committee wishes to provide an update on work completed to date and recommend next steps in the process.

Work completed to date

The work to date has included:

- Surveying current and former board members and commissioners
- Reviewing our laws, policies and procedures as well as those of other cities and towns
- Interviewing the staff who work with our boards and commissions

Survey

The survey had eight questions and was sent to 123 current and former board members and commissioners for whom the City Clerk had email addresses, of whom 66 responded. Highlights of the survey include an average score of 8 out of 10 when asked if they would recommend serving on a board or commission to others. There were many positive comments, with the vast majority centered around community -- contributing to, serving, giving back to, and feeling a part of -- as well as working with other members and staff and sharing particular expertise. The negative comments included the process for setting agendas, public reaction to unpopular decisions, lack of clarity or involvement from the City Council, time commitment required, and working with other board members and commissioners. Council members may want to review the open-ended responses to get a sense of the responses. The ad hoc committee appreciates the work of the Chief Communication Official in conducting and analyzing this survey and is grateful to all of the board members and commissioners who took the time to participate in the survey and share their thoughts.

Policies and procedures

The suite of policies and procedures that we currently have is not consistent across boards and commissions and does not provide clear guidance about roles and responsibilities, including that of the staff liaison, the Chair, or the Council liaison. The policies and procedures, roles and responsibilities, and handbooks that four other cities provide offer helpful direction for

improving our own. For example, Redwood City has a signature page for board members and commissioners to indicate their understanding of the roles and responsibilities, Mountain View describes when boards and commissions may use subcommittees and how, Sunnyvale provides mandatory training for board members and commissioners, and Menlo Park defines the role of the chair and encourages good working relationships with other advisory board members. The ad hoc committee appreciates the work of the City Attorney in identifying and providing relevant documents, which are shared below.

- [Link](#) to Palo Alto
- [Link](#) to Mountain View
- [Link](#) to Redwood City
- [Link](#) to Sunnyvale
- [Link](#) to Menlo Park

Interviews with staff

During our interviews with Staff Liaisons, several issues were highlighted. As mentioned above, we should establish clear roles and responsibilities for staff and share those proactively with board members and commissioners. Defined processes on establishing a work plan and changing that plan throughout the year are also needed.

The amount of time and effort for a staffer to work with a board or commission is very significant, as much as 50 percent of their time in a month. This investment can be worthwhile to help clarify strategy, get productive work done, and vet recommendations to Council, but needs to be managed properly.

Regrettably, there is concern about how a few board members and commissioners have treated staff and their colleagues over the years. While this behavior appears to be quite rare, the ad hoc committee is concerned about the impact on our professional staff and the important work that they do with the boards and commissions. The ad hoc committee appreciates the time that staff took to meet with us.

Recommendations to be considered

Our initial recommendations include:

- Updates to the application and interview process
- Training for new members/commissioners and new chairs and vice-chairs
- Using annual work plans with a process to change priorities during the year
- Creating a handbook that establishes policies and procedures for how boards and commissions work, including expectations for those appointed
- Updates to our underlying ordinances
- Considering changes to the boards and commissions themselves

Application and interview process

- Create a cover letter for the application that summarizes expectations for the role as well as the suggestion that applicants watch a few meetings and review relevant documents to become familiar with the board or commission's work
- Review all questions for relevance and links to ensure accuracy
- Consider moving all appointments to the same time of year to allow for training program and to reduce timing issues related to Council elections (for discussion)
- Establishing term limits in line with the Council term limits or three terms (for discussion)

Training

Two types of training are recommended. First, an onboarding training that includes information about how to be a good board member or commissioner, as well as how to comply with the Brown Act and board/commission specific information. Second, training for new chairs and vice-chairs will help them transition into their new roles effectively. The City Manager's Office would be well positioned to lead this training, in conjunction with the City Attorney and the various departments.

Annual Workplans (for discussion)

Many other jurisdictions require annual workplans from the boards and commissions which could be placed on Council's consent calendar. One suggestion from the survey was to have these workplans be created after the Council's priority setting meeting so that boards and commissions can integrate those into their own work. The ad hoc committee believes having an annual workplan will improve the coordination and communication between Council and boards and commissions. There also needs to be a clear process for a board or commission to initiate work during the year. This could be a memo from the board or commission, approved by a majority vote with an exception for emergencies. Additionally, individual board and commission members should not be permitted to initiate work for staff.

Handbook

The ad hoc committee recommends that Council direct staff to create a handbook that outlines roles and responsibilities for board members and commissioners, including expectations for professional conduct, conflicts of interest and recusals, attendance policies, how and when appointees can be removed, and roles of the staff, chair, and Council liaison. The ad hoc committee has reviewed the four exemplars from other jurisdictions with staff and made initial suggestions about desired topics and initial work is underway. A draft will be brought to Council for review and approval.

Changes to boards and commissions (for discussion)

While reviewing the survey results, listening to staff, and learning about other cities, we have identified a few possible changes that Council may wish to consider. These are offered as concepts at this stage, not as recommendations.

- Disbanding the Library Advisory Commission, as some members recommended

- Adding a Senior Commission, as some other cities have
- Adding a Climate/Environment/Sustainability Commission, as most other cities have
- Splitting Planning and Transportation Commission into two, to align with the two departments

Discussion topics

We would like to get some feedback from council on several items, noted above as for discussion:

1. The idea of workplans and a prioritization process for new work during the year
2. Establishing term limits and for how long
3. Moving to a single interview period in spring, with more selective filtering of candidates to interview
4. Proposed changes to our boards and commissions

Next steps

Much of this work is in progress. The ad-hoc committee has considered the input of current and former board members and commissioners and looked at practices in other cities and is working with staff to bring draft updates back to Council for the application and interview process, training, workplan process, handbook and ordinance updates.

The ad hoc committee respectfully requests that we continue to work with staff to develop these draft documents and bring them back to Council as refined proposals.