

Boards & Commissions Assessment: Findings & Recommendations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past ten months, in response to a Council petition, a staff team has assessed the current state of Boards and Commissions. They engaged staff liaisons and board members, researched best practices, applied an equity lens to the application and appointment process, and reviewed similar initiatives at peer municipalities.

This report provides details of that assessment, in advance of a conversation with Council later this year about the larger landscape of our community engagement initiatives. Some of those initiatives are detailed in this report, while others are still taking shape. Understanding this larger context of Town engagement efforts may be helpful as Council considers next steps for Boards and Commissions.

Based on conversations with Council, staff liaisons, and Board members, the team identified three overarching, shared interests:

- Meaningful and diverse public input and community engagement
- Good stewardship of staff and community resources
- Clear, common understanding of roles and responsibilities

Based on their overall assessment, the team developed two central recommendations that could meet those shared interests:

- 1) Consistent, standard Board practices, policies, and procedures
 - Narrow policy focus and advise Town Council, not staff
 - Consistent names, charges, and memberships
 - Meet less often, only while Council is in session
 - Improved onboarding and training, especially DEI
- 2) Equity-informed recruitment, application, and appointment processes
 - Targeted recruitment to diverse populations
 - Application form that elevates lived experience
 - Blind review of applications by staff and boards
 - Equity-informed application scoring rubric

The staff team received generally positive feedback on these, but they have not received clear direction from Council about which Boards to apply them to – or which Boards should continue to exist. Some Council members are interested in significantly reducing the number of Boards, while others are interested in applying these standards to the current Boards. Information about the Town’s overall engagement efforts may help Council provide clear direction to staff.

BACKGROUND

[In June 2023, some Council members petitioned for an assessment of the Town's current Boards and Commissions.](#) The petition asked several specific questions and requested that actionable recommendations be brought to Council by the fall of 2023.

Staff presented their findings and recommendations to Council at work sessions on September 20, 2023 and November 13, 2023 and at a business meeting on March 6, 2024.

COUNCIL PETITION

Petition Questions

The petition listed some specific questions that Council members were interested in receiving answers to:

- What are the Council's expectations of these bodies, both collectively and individually? Are these expectations being fulfilled?
- What are the costs to the Town of staffing/supporting these bodies and is the Town getting value for these expenditures?
- Are there opportunities to consolidate or phase out any of the existing boards and commissions
- For those boards and commissions deemed to be necessary, what should their role and charge be?
- How can the Town ensure that the membership of the boards and commissions is reflective of the Town's population such that all voices are heard?
- Related to the above, is the Town's current method of screening candidates and appointing members optimal?

These questions guided the staff's work throughout the process and informed the development of their recommendations.

Petition Scope

The scope of the staff team's work was all but the four semi-autonomous boards: the Planning Commission, Community Design Commission, Historic District Commission, and Board of Adjustment. The composition and charge of these semi-autonomous boards may be reviewed after a new LUMO is considered and adopted by Council. If the Council chooses, the recommendations developed by the staff team may be considered for and applied to the semi-autonomous boards.

The boards within the staff team’s scope of work were:

- Community Policing Advisory Committee
- Cultural Arts Commission
- Environmental Sustainability Advisory Board
- Grievance Hearing Board
- Housing Advisory Board
- Human Services Advisory Board
- Justice in Action Committee
- Library Advisory Board
- Parks, Greenways, and Recreation Commission
- Stormwater Management Utility Advisory Board
- Transportation and Connectivity Advisory Board

STAFF TEAM

The Town Manager asked staff from several departments to respond to the petition. The team brought a range of experience in working with community engagement generally and boards and commissions specifically.

- Anita Badrock, Director of Employee Engagement & Organizational Development
- Susan Brown, Director of Strategic Communications & Marketing
- Matt Debellis, Records Manager
- Amy Harvey, Deputy Town Clerk
- Brenton Hodge, Assistant Town Clerk
- Sabrina Oliver, Director of Governance Services and Town Clerk
- Sarah Poulton, Special Projects Manager
- Britany Waddell, Planning Director
- Shenekia Weeks, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer

STAFF PROCESS & FINDINGS

Phase 1: Identify Shared Interests

First, the staff reviewed the Council petition to identify the overarching interests at hand. In a close reading of that document, staff identified three interests:

- Meaningful and diverse public input and community engagement
- Good stewardship of staff and community resources
- Clear, common understanding of roles and responsibilities

These interests were consistently shared by the staff, Board members, and the Council. As the team developed recommendations for improvements, these interests served as a checklist to gauge ideas against.

Phase 2: Engage Staff Liaisons and Board Members

Next, the staff team engaged staff liaisons and Board/Commission members. The team surveyed staff liaisons and had a follow up meeting, and they surveyed some Board members, while others were engaged via Zoom and in-person meetings.

The key findings from this phase were:

- **Staff dedicate a significant amount of time to Boards and Commissions, beyond the monthly meetings.** Staff do much more than just attend the meetings. There is considerable pre- and post- meeting preparation and follow up, as well as agendas, minutes, packet preparation, and meetings with Chairs and Vice Chairs. A conservative “back of the napkin” estimate is that the Town spends approximately \$10,000 monthly/\$120,000 annually on staff support for Boards and Commissions.
- **Staff highly value diverse community input, and Boards and Commissions are only one way to receive that.** Across departments, Town staff indicate that they deeply value community input and perspective, as it aligns their work with the people they serve. They also indicate that Boards and Commissions are only one avenue to receiving that input. Staff liaisons regularly work with the DEI Office, the Community Connections Division, the Community Relations Manager, and the Strategic Communications Team in order to widen the scope of their community engagement efforts.
- **Staff most value Boards and Commissions input on policy-level work.** While staff have more ways than ever to directly engage a more diverse swath of our community, they also indicated that Boards and Commissions often help with a specific aspect of their work – policy development and assessment. Many staff shared examples of how their Boards helped them consider the implications and impacts of policy proposals and revisions before these were brought to Council for consideration.

- **Boards and Commissions that have focused on policy-level work report a higher sense of impact.** Many Board members indicated that agenda items are often staff reports and Board members sharing ideas. Many said that while these are interesting to hear and discuss, they don't often result in impact. Some Board members indicated that when their Board has focused on policy issues, they have felt a greater sense of impact and more satisfaction with their service on the Board.
- **Board and Commission members are often unclear about their roles and responsibilities, individually and collectively.** In both the survey and in follow up meetings, many Board members indicated that they don't always understand their roles individually or collectively, which leads to a feeling of lesser impact and importance. Members indicated that their Board's charge is unclear and that they desired more specificity about expectations for their volunteer service.
- **Board and Commission members want to have an impact.** Members indicated that they reason they raise their hands and volunteer their time and talent is to have a positive impact on the community they live in. Many of them also indicated that more clarity around what Council wants them to focus on would be helpful, as well as more clarity around roles and responsibilities.

Phase 3: Research Best Practices and Current Trends

Staff turned to a number of sources and resources to conduct an environmental scan of current best practices and trends in this area. Here are some of those key findings:

- **Having some Boards is a common practice; very few are required by statute.** Most municipalities have an array of Boards and Commissions. However, most are not required by state statute. In North Carolina, there are some functions that, by statute, must be carried out by a semi-autonomous Board. For us, those functions are carried out by the Board of Adjustment, the Historic District Commission, Planning Commission, and Community Design Commission.
- **Boards and Commissions often act as a pipeline or steppingstone to City or Town Council.** This is the case in Chapel Hill and we found it to be a common thread among other municipalities. Service on a Board or Commission can give members insight into municipal government functions, policy challenges, and expose them to a variety of useful skills, from agenda setting to meeting facilitation to consensus building.

- **Scope creep is common, so having clear guidelines is a key to success.** As with any nonprofit or governing Board, scope creep is a common challenge for municipal Advisory Boards. Clear guidelines, charges, job descriptions, and training are most often cited as ways to counter the tendency towards scope creep.
- **In the spectrum of public participation, Boards and Commissions function at the “consult” level.** Staff from across the organization are invested in the work of the IAP2 (International Association for Public Participation) and their spectrum, which defines different levels and impacts of participation and engagement. The spectrum outlines five levels of participation - Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate, and Empower - as well as defines the goal and promise of the participation level. The IAP2 Spectrum is included at the end of this report.

At the Consult level, the governing body asks (consults) the public for their opinion and considers the input as it makes the decision. The goal at this level is to obtain and consider public input, while the promise is to consider the input received and explain how that input influenced the decision.

- **Creating and closing the Council to Boards/Commissions feedback loop is challenging.** In our environmental scan, the staff team found that governing bodies are often challenged to “close the loop” and explain to Boards and Commissions how their recommendations were considered in the decision-making process. They also found that municipalities are often not clear about at which participation level Boards and Commissions function, which can lead to scope creep and/or confusion about roles.

Phase 4: Apply a DEI and UX lens to Application/Appointment Process

For this phase, a subset of the staff team, led by DEI Officer Shenekia Weeks, assessed the recruitment, application, and appointment process with an equity lens, as well as a user experience mindset. While some individual Boards and Commissions have made intentional efforts to increase diversity, there has not been a holistic equity assessment.

Staff Findings

Recruitment

- While applications are accepted year-round, staff conduct a Spring recruitment. This recruitment takes many forms, from social media posts and blurbs in the weekly Town enews to tabling at high visibility locations such as

Chapel Hill Public Library and festivals and events. Staff are committed to targeting diverse populations and continue to work with DEI Office and Community Connections team on targeted outreach.

Application

- The current application form focuses on subject matter expertise and technical knowledge. To encourage more diverse residents to apply – and to consider lived experience as being equally valuable to subject matter expertise, we can create a form that focuses on lived experiences in order welcome more diverse people, such as:
 - People who are long term renters
 - People who speak languages other than English
 - People who use mobility devices to get around
 - People with chronic physical or mental health conditions
 - People who have experienced food or housing insecurity
 - People who rely primarily on public transportation

Selection

- Boards review applications and make a recommendation to Council, while Council makes the final appointments. Currently, there is not a defined, consistent process for Boards to review applications and make recommendations – some just review applications, other interview applicants, etc.
 - The lack of a defined process can lead to cronyism, whether real or perceived. Human nature often leads us to select people most similar to ourselves, as do implicit biases.
 - The lack of a defined process can also diminish trust in the system. If the criteria and guidelines aren't clear or transparent, then applicants may be left in the dark about why they were – or were not - chosen.

Appointment

- Council makes appointments based on somewhat limited knowledge of the applicant. The application doesn't elevate lived experience, so Council only knows part of the applicant's story. The screening process that Boards use is inconsistent across Boards, so Council can't always be confident that recommendations were made with equity in mind.

ANSWERS TO PETITION QUESTIONS

Based on the staff team engagement, research, and findings, these are answers to the questions listed in the Council Petition:

What are the Council's expectations of these bodies, both collectively and individually? Are these expectations being fulfilled?

Collectively, there is not clear consensus from Council on what they expect from Boards and Commissions. Some Council members have indicated an expectation of receiving policy-level guidance from these bodies, while others have asked more existential questions about Board roles and expectations.

What are the costs to the Town of staffing/supporting these bodies and is the Town getting value for these expenditures?

The "back of the napkin," conservative estimate is that the Town spends approximately \$120,000 of staff time annually to support Boards and Commissions.

The answer to the question of value is varied among both Council and staff. Some Council members see significant value in the existing Boards and Commissions, while others see less value. Most staff liaisons see some value, while all of them indicate that value would increase with more narrowly defined charges for Boards and Commissions.

One way to decrease expenditures would be to focus the charge of the Boards to advising Council on policy, reducing the number of meetings, and clearly defining the various roles (especially those of staff). Another way to decrease staff expenditures would be to disband and/or consolidate a number of boards.

Are there opportunities to consolidate or phase out any of the existing boards and commissions?

Yes. The staff team recommended phasing out the Justice in Action Committee and revamping the Grievance Hearing Board. Additionally, the staff team recommended phasing out the Transportation and Connectivity Board and assessing the need for a board as the Office of Mobility and Greenways continues to develop. The Library Advisory Board and Cultural Arts Commission could be consolidated into one Board, given that these two entities are under the common leadership of the Director of Chapel Hill Public Library and Community Arts & Culture.

For those boards and commissions deemed to be necessary, what should their role and charge be?

The staff team recommends that any Advisory Board have a narrowly focused charge to advise Council on policy matters, as well as clearly defined roles and responsibilities.

How can the Town ensure that the membership of the boards and commissions is reflective of the Town’s population such that all voices are heard?

The staff team recommends an end-to-end revamping of the recruitment, application, and appointment system in order to ensure membership that is more reflective of the Town’s population.

Related to the above, is the Town’s current method of screening candidates and appointing members optimal?

No. The current process carries a significant administrative burden for staff, and a high barrier to access.

EXAMPLES FROM PEER MUNICIPALITIES

The staff team found two relevant examples from peer municipalities, Lawrence, KS and Asheville, NC. A review of these cases reveals that we are not alone in assessing Boards and Commissions - and that reorganizing and realigning Boards and Commissions systems is challenging to execute and fully realize.

ASHEVILLE, NC

In 2022, in response to feedback from Board members, City staff, and City Council members, Asheville sought to improve and realign their advisory board system. That feedback was summarized as follows:

- The roles and responsibilities of board members were unclear
- There is a disconnect of priorities and work between boards and commissions
- There was unclear communication flow to City Council

City staff explored options for an advisory board structure that met the following interests:

- Represent a more diverse cross section of the community and work to eliminate barriers to participation.

- Design a more effective structure with clear communication lines among boards and to City Council.
- Clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the advisory board and its members and align advisory board work with City Council priorities and the City's Comprehensive Plan.

[City staff presented a recommendation](#) to reduce the twenty existing boards down to four:

- Equitable community
- Well planned community
- Housing advisory
- Healthy environment and livable community

These advisory boards would meet monthly with public comment, supported by city staff, and make recommendations and regular updates to council committees. The recommendation also included a framework to use working groups focused on a singular issue that would have very focused charges and dissolve after the assignment was completed.

The City Council received significant community feedback and concern on this proposal, so a working group was formed to supplement the staff findings and survey current board members. The latest update on the project page indicates the working group has not yet presented its findings to the Council.

[The Asheville City website](#) indicates that the City still has all of its existing Boards and Commissions and are actively recruiting for their membership while the review and realignment is taking place.

LAWRENCE, KS

In 2022, the Lawrence City Commission [asked for a plan](#) to help better align the City's volunteer boards and commissions to the work of the [strategic plan](#).

Formed in December 2022, the Commission charged the [Boards and Commissions Structure Committee](#) with the following:

- Develop recommendations that limit the number of boards to no more than 10 (not inclusive of those boards required by statute or state law)

- Outline a transition process from the current boards and commissions structure to the new configuration.
- Provide recommendations around how advisory board recommendations are made, how agendas are prepared, authority and responsibility for on-boarding or orientation of board members, and the role, authority, duties, and responsibilities of City staff.

In 2023, the Committee presented [its formal recommendation to the City Commission](#), highlight of which were as follows:

- Eight boards to align closely with the City’s Strategic Plan
- New policies and procedures that would apply to all City Boards
- The use of operational boards that would give staff access to additional technical insight for specific city functions that do not necessarily lead to policy changes.

The City Commission accepted the recommendation, with some modifications, [most notably to retain the Sustainability Advisory Board](#).

When reviewing the work done in Lawrence, KS, it is worthwhile to note that while they reduced and realigned the Advisory Boards, they continue to have numerous Commissions, Technical Boards, and Governing Boards.

In a memo from the Lawrence City Manager, he notes that Boseman, Montana and Corvallis, Oregon have recently undertaken similar efforts, noting:

“Common to both efforts was clear direction from the governing body, alignment to a strategic plan, and common rules, procedures, orientation, and rules of conduct for members.”

STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS

The staff team made two initial recommendations that have already been implemented:

- **Sunset the Justice in Action Committee.** This was an example of a committee that was formed at a specific time with a specific purpose. The committee did important work, including advocating for more Town resources dedicated to DEI. The committee was struggling with a clear charge and maintaining quorum. After a good conversation with some members of the staff team, the Committee

agreed to disband. Council subsequently formalized this action and thanked the committee for their service.

- **Professionalize the membership of the Grievance Hearing Board.** This board reviews the Town’s serious disciplinary actions to ensure that the Town followed its policies and procedures. It had standing members from the community who meet only when a serious disciplinary action has been taken and a grievance filed – which is very rare. We are revamping the membership of this board to ensure that our employees get what they deserve – a professional, external review of the most serious personnel action we take.

Within the scope of the petition, nine Advisory Boards remain:

- Community Policing Advisory Committee
- Cultural Arts Commission
- Environmental Sustainability Advisory Board
- Housing Advisory Board
- Human Services Advisory Board
- Library Advisory Board
- Parks, Greenways, and Recreation Commission
- Stormwater Management Utility Advisory Board
- Transportation and Connectivity Advisory Board

The staff team has developed two central recommendations, based on engagement with staff and board members and review of best practices, that could apply to any or all of the remaining nine Advisory Boards.

- Implement consistent, standard Boards practices, policies, and procedures
- Implement equity-informed recruitment, application, and appointment processes

IMPLEMENT STANDARD PRACTICES

We recommend standardizing the number of members, roles, meeting frequencies, and training across all Boards to streamline operations and clarify expectations.

- _____ Advisory Board
- Charge is policy advice to Council
- 7 members
- Consistent membership practices

- Consistent terms of office
- Define Chair, Vice Chair, Liaison roles
- Consistent agenda structure and content
- Meet during Council session (Sept – June)
- Meet 4 times per Council session, unless special meetings are warranted
- Board 101 training, including DEI

IMPLEMENT EQUITABLE PROCESSES

We recommend enhancing our recruitment and application processes to better reach under-represented populations and ensure a diverse range of perspectives. We also recommend redesigning the application review and appointment process in order to increase diversity, decrease cronyism, and build more trust in the process.

Recruitment and Outreach

- Prioritize diversity in recruiting efforts
- Provide clarity about expectations, so that residents know what they are raising their hand for
- Leverage partnerships to target recruitment (IFC, NAACP, Jackson Center, CEF, etc.)

Application Process and Form

- Create a predictable, standardized recruitment calendar
- Create an easy to find, easy to complete application form
- Elevate diverse, lived experience on application form

Recommendations and Appointments

- Create an equity-informed application review process
- Staff and board members to separately review applications
- Use a standard scoring rubric
- Elevate diverse, lived experience in review and recommendation
- Present Council with a fuller understanding of applicants lived experience and reasoning behind the recommendations

IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation



IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. The Spectrum is used internationally, and it is found in public participation plans around the world.

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION					
	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.