



# TOWN OF CHAPEL HILL

Town Hall  
405 Martin Luther King Jr.  
Boulevard  
Chapel Hill, NC 27514

## Legislation Text

File #: [23-0670], Version: 1

### Boards & Commissions Assessment/Staff Response to Council Petition.

#### Staff:

Susan Brown, Executive Director  
Sarah Poulton, Senior Project Manager  
Anita Badrock, Senior Ombuds  
Shenekia Weeks, Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Officer  
Sabrina Oliver, Director  
Amy Harvey, Deputy Town Clerk  
Brenton Hodge, Assistant Town Clerk

#### Department:

Community Arts & Culture/Library  
Manager's Office

Governance Services/Town Clerk

### **BACKGROUND**

In June 2023, a [petition from several Council Members <https://chapelhill.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=12100727&GUID=38F2693C-E72B-4F06-8891-6D71B80EE2F6>](https://chapelhill.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=12100727&GUID=38F2693C-E72B-4F06-8891-6D71B80EE2F6) requested an assessment of the Town's Boards and Commissions along two tracks:

- **Track 1 covers the seven bodies formally or informally included in development review**, which are being assessed as part of the LUMO rewrite. As that work continues, recommendations from Track 2 may be incorporated.
- **Track 2 covers the remaining boards and commissions**, with a focus on Council expectations, board charges, and member roles, and includes:
  - Library Advisory Board
  - Cultural Arts Commission
  - Human Services Advisory Board
  - Community Policing Advisory Committee
  - Parks, Recreation, and Greenways Commission
  - Grievance Hearing Board
  - Justice in Action Committee

The petition also asked for an assessment of current methods for screening and appointing members, which has not yet been addressed.

The Town Manager referred the petition to a team comprised of staff from Governance Services, Managers Office, and Library/Community Arts & Culture for response.

### **SHARED INTERESTS**

Before beginning an assessment process, the staff team considered what they have heard from Council, staff, and community and developed three high-level interests to guide the assessment and subsequent recommendations:

- Meaningful community engagement and diverse public input
- Good stewardship of staff and community resources

- Clear, common understanding of roles and responsibilities

## **STAFF ASSESSMENT**

The staff team conducted a three-part assessment process:

**1) Analysis of Staff Time and Meeting Length** - The staff team surveyed liaisons from both tracks and reviewed Zoom meeting data. Key findings include:

- 20 staff spend about 270 hours per month supporting 17 boards and commissions
- 7 boards or commissions have 2 or more staff members supporting them
- Average meeting time for Track 1 boards is 2 hours, 26 minutes
- Average meeting time for Track 2 boards is 1 hour, 22 minutes

**2) Engagement with Staff Liaisons** - In two focus groups, staff from both tracks shared their perspectives and experiences with boards and commissions. Key findings include:

- Now more than ever before, staff have numerous avenues available for diverse, equitable, and inclusive community engagement and public input.
- Staff have the subject matter expertise needed for decision making about programs and service delivery.
- Staff find that boards and commissions are most beneficial when they engage on high-level policy matters that rise to the level of Council attention.
- Boards and commissions often veer into advising staff rather than Council and focusing on programs and projects rather than policy.

**3) Engagement with Board and Commission Members.** Members from Track 2 were asked to share their perspectives and experiences via a survey. Key findings from this include:

- Members feel valued when asked to engage on important policy matters.
- Members want clear charges and understanding of their roles and responsibilities.
- Members want to be acknowledged by Council, even if Council disagrees.
- Members and staff struggle to recruit members from diverse backgrounds.

## **THEMES**

Staff developed three overarching themes from across the assessment phases:

- Both Town Council and Town staff value community engagement and public input for making decisions and setting policy.
- Both Town Council and Town staff engage community in numerous ways for decision making and feedback with a focus on hearing from traditionally marginalized voices.
- Advisory boards and commissions work best when their charge is specific, concise, and consistent and their relationship to Council and staff is clearly articulated.

## **STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS**

To meet the interests of meaningful public input, stewardship of resources, and clear understanding of roles and responsibilities, the broad staff recommendation is for Council to consider adopting standard practices for boards and commissions, which may include:

- Consistent naming conventions, with Advisory Board used for most\*
- Charges focused on advising Town Council on policy matters\*\*
- Meeting while Council is in session
- Meeting bimonthly or quarterly
- Consistent approach to board size and terms of office
- Standard training for all members, including racial equity tools.

*\*Except Planning, CDC, and HDC, and Board of Adjustment*

*\*\* Unless the body has a statutory authority or quasi-judicial decision-making function.*

Recommendations for individual boards and commissions could be as follows, recognizing that implementation may look different across different boards:

### **Library Advisory Board - Align written charge with understood charge.**

- This board underwent a self-assessment in 2015/16 and petitioned Council to change their name from the Library Board of Trustees to the Library Advisory Board. At the same time, the Board agreed to a new charge of advising Council on policy matters related to the Library. However, they did not ask Council to formally adopt that charge.

### **Cultural Arts Commission - Approve petition to change name, charge, and membership.**

- This body recently petitioned Council to change their name, charge, and membership. These changes would rename the body to the Community Arts & Culture Advisory Board, clarify roles and responsibilities, and reduce their membership from 11 to 9.

### **Human Services Advisory Board.**

- Staff team can work with staff liaison, departmental leadership, and Board to explore implementation of standards.

### **Community Policing Advisory Committee.**

- Staff team can work with staff liaison, departmental leadership, and Board to explore implementation of standards.

### **Parks, Recreation, and Greenways Commission.**

- Staff team can work with staff liaison, departmental leadership, and Board to explore implementation of standards.

**Grievance Hearing Board - Consider best practices for external, objective disciplinary action reviews.**

- This Board is currently comprised of community members and meets very infrequently to review and verify that the Town followed its disciplinary policies and processes when a serious disciplinary decision has occurred. This is an important step in the serious disciplinary process and we want to ensure that our review process provides the best possible objective, professional guidance. Staff recommend working with HRD, Legal, and the Employee Forum on this review to explore best practices, including if review should be provided by people with certain skill sets and professional training.

**Justice in Action Committee - Sunset this committee.**

- This was an ad hoc committee whose initial charge is being addressed across multiple Town departments and Council initiatives, including our DEI Office and One Orange framework, the Community Connections team's work around equitable engagement and language justice, and a town-wide focus on DEI at the departmental level.

**Public Housing Advisory Board---Consider creation.**

- Earlier this year, Council asked for alternative governance options for the Town's Public Housing program and staff proposed that Council consider establishing a Public Housing Advisory Board. Staff can continue this consideration and draft a charge and membership in alignment with the standards recommended above.

**NEXT STEPS**

If Council agrees with the above standard and recommendations, staff can do the following:

- Work with staff liaisons, departmental leadership, and Boards to explore those standards and bring any changes back to Council for approval.
- Review best practices for external review of serious disciplinary action and return to Council with recommendation.
- Draft a resolution and ordinance for Council to sunset Justice in Action Committee.
- Draft preliminary information for Council to consider in establishing a Public Housing Advisory Board.

Additionally, staff can assess the application and appointment process using both a racial equity lens to promote greater diversity and representation and a user experience approach to promote a useful and useable process for applicants, staff, and Council.

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**The Agenda will reflect the text below and/or the motion text will be used during the meeting.**

PRESENTER: Susan Brown, Community Arts & Culture Executive Director/Chapel Hill Public Library Director

The purpose of this item is to share staff findings and recommendations in response to Council petition requesting an assessment of Town Boards & Commissions.