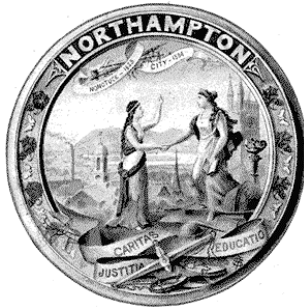


**DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR ENSURING THE USE OF LOCALLY
AND NATIONALLY ACCEPTED BEST
PRACTICES IN NORTHAMPTON
DECISION-MAKING**



**Presented to the Northampton City Council
December 4, 2008**

**AD-HOC COMMITTEE ON BEST PRACTICES
IN NORTHAMPTON DECISION-MAKING**

Lisa DePiano James Palermo
Co-Chairs

Michael Bardsley Wendy Foxmyn Alex Ghiselin
David Narkewicz Robert Reckman

HISTORY

On December 6, 2007, the Northampton City Council adopted a Resolution establishing an Ad-Hoc Committee on Best Practices in Northampton Decision Making and empowered it to “create and oversee a public process for reviewing municipal decision-making in the City of Northampton and make recommendations to the City Council on ensuring the use of locally and nationally accepted best practices in our community” (Appendix 1).

Four citizens (Lisa DePiano, Alex Ghiselin, Wendy Foxmyn, and James Palermo) and three members of the City Council (At-Large Councilor Michael Bardsley, Ward 4 Councilor David Narkewicz, and Ward 3 Councilor Robert Reckman) were formally appointed to the Committee on February 7, 2008 and its first official meeting convened on March 5, 2008.

The Committee elected Lisa DePiano and James Palermo as its Co-Chairs, established a twice-monthly meeting schedule, and set to work over the next nine months fulfilling its charge.

WORK PLAN

The Resolution required the Committee to develop a “work plan” and present it to the City Council in preliminary form no later than April 3, 2008. The early actions of the Committee were guided by this objective:

- Received a briefing from Northwestern Assistant District Attorney Cynthia Pepyne to ensure that the Committee conducted all of its work in compliance with the Massachusetts Open Meeting Law.
- Made inquiries to the City Council President regarding budget and staffing. It should be noted that due to the City Council’s limited budget, the Committee was not extended any significant resources or staffing beyond copying and basic office supply purchases.
- Created and adopted a “Mission Statement” to define and clearly communicate the purpose and goals of the Committee (Appendix 2).
- Created and adopted a “Public Participation Policy” and “Meeting Ground Rules” to ensure that the Committee’s meeting process incorporated both public participation and civility (Appendix 3 & 4).
- Created and adopted a “Consensus Decision-Making Model” establishing that the Committee would make decisions by consensus rather than a Robert’s Rules of Order, majority rule approach traditionally utilized by City committees (Appendix 5).
- Created and adopted a “Plan of Action” defining and dividing the Committee’s work schedule into separate phases of discovery, deliberation, and reporting (Appendix 6).

The Committee publicly presented its preliminary work plan at the April 3, 2008 meeting of the City Council in the form of the aforementioned written Mission Statement, Public Participation Policy, Plan of Action, Meeting Ground Rules, and Consensus Decision-Making Model.

With the acceptance of its preliminary work plan by the City Council, the Committee formally entered its discovery phase and once more was guided by the language of the Resolution in further dividing its work into three distinct aspects:

OUTREACH

“The Committee’s work will include the gathering of ideas and information from citizens, citizen organizations and groups,” ...

INREACH

“...City boards and commissions, elected and appointed officials, and staff.”

RESEARCH

“It will also include the study of relevant decision-making best practices in other selected municipalities.”

OUTREACH

The Committee undertook extensive outreach efforts to gather public input regarding experiences and concerns citizens have had interacting with city government. The Committee also actively solicited comments, ideas and recommendations about what worked well and what city government could do differently. Public outreach efforts included, but were not limited to:

- Going beyond the minimum requirements of the Open Meeting Law, posting all meeting notices on the City’s online calendar as well as various community listserves and blogs.
- Actively inviting and engaging members of the public to participate in committee meetings and to join committee working groups and sub-committees.
- Creating and maintaining a committee web presence on the City of Northampton website at <http://www.northamptonma.gov/bestpractices> (Appendix 7). It included names and contact information of all committee members, notices, agendas, and minutes of all meetings, copies of documents for download, links to research on government best practices, and a suggestion box for comments.
- A Google Users Group at <http://groups.google.com/group/northamptonbestpractices> was established to solicit public comment and discussion that could be read by all viewing the pages (Appendix 8).
- Worked with Northampton Community Television (NCTV) and the North Street Neighborhood Association to facilitate the videotaping and broadcasting/web casting nearly all of the Committee’s meetings and events.

- Created, promoted, and made available via download, a “Public Meeting Review Form” for citizen meeting attendees to use for documenting procedures of city meetings (Appendix 9).
- Members appeared on WHMP radio and met with editors and reporters at the Daily Hampshire Gazette, The Republican, and the Valley Advocate newspapers to promote its meetings and forums.
- The Committee tabled at, and participated in a April 29, 2008 community event held at Jackson Street School to promote community interest and input.

In addition to these efforts, the Committee formed working groups that included citizen volunteers to organize and host two major public forums designed to facilitate public input on Northampton decision-making. Press releases, flyers, radio appearances, listserv postings, and person-to-person outreach were employed to publicize both events.

On May 13, 2008, a general public forum on best practices was held at J.F.K. Middle School in Florence and was attended by over 60 members of the public. The event was professionally facilitated and featured both large and small group activities generating dozens of concerns and ideas for Committee deliberation and consideration (Appendix 10).

On August 25, 2008, a second forum featuring community panelists was held to discuss and record the history of the public planning process for the Meadows Land Use Plan. The event was videotaped and a report summarizing key observations and recommendations was prepared for Committee review and consideration (Appendix 11).

INREACH

A concerted “inreach” effort was undertaken in order to encourage and honor, by inviting their comments, the experiences and wisdom of city officials (elected, appointed and employees). A subcommittee was formed and met to organize and implement a multi-faceted effort to solicit and gather this input:

- E-mail to all city officials from the Committee via the Mayor’s Office staff informing them of the best practices effort and encouraging them to be in contact with their opinions and suggestions. City officials were also welcomed to attend the May 13, 2008 community forum and several current and former officials were panelists at our August 25, 2008 forum.
- Interviewed nine key city officials (Mayor, City Council President, City Clerk, Finance Director, Superintendent of Schools, School Committee Vice Chair, Director of Planning and Development, Department of Public Works Director, and Economic Development Director) to gain their insights and observations on decision-making and public process in Northampton. Several of these officials provided useful follow-up information (e.g., City Clerk’s customer service survey, copies of city policies, etc.).

- Developed, distributed, and tabulated a “Self-Review Form” for boards, committees, and commissions to survey the existing protocols and processes of these important decision-making bodies (Appendix 12).

The inreach effort proved very worthwhile, providing the Committee more knowledge about city operations and adding perspective to information gathered from other input sources. The Committee’s recommendations reflect and integrate concerns and comments offered by numerous city officials, all of which were compiled in a final inreach report (Appendix 13).

RESEARCH

The original impetus for a City conversation around best practices was a citizen petition that highlighted work done in other communities to improve public participation and decision-making (Appendix 14).

Using those original references together with recommended areas of research gathered from input at public meetings and forums and from Committee members’ personal research, the Committee’s research working group conducted an extensive review of governmental decision-making best practices in other municipalities that included:

- Studying two comprehensive efforts to improve decision-making and public participation in Portland, Oregon and Vancouver, British Columbia.
- Researching and identifying 33 separate decision-making practices from other municipalities in 8 specific process areas identified by the Committee via public input at its meetings and forums.
- Compiling an extensive list of online links to other best practice-related organizations and resources.

Best practices research from other communities provided the Committee helpful insight into possible alternative approaches to local decision-making processes and were compiled with online links into a single document for further study and reference (Appendix 15).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee spent a significant amount of time compiling input and information gathered from its outreach, inreach, and research activities. It spent an equal amount of time analyzing that information, identifying trends and common themes, and, through discussion and consensus deliberation, arrived at a core group of ideas to move forward.

The Ad Hoc Committee on Best Practices in Northampton Decision Making respectfully submits the following recommendations to the Northampton City Council:

1. Develop written protocols for conducting various types of public meetings for City committees, departments, and other decision-making bodies. Consider the following:

- Publicly posting for each year a list of all regularly scheduled meetings and making an easy-to-understand, timed agenda available to the public prior to each one.
- Making the rules governing committees and their processes available to the public.
- Informing the public, especially key stakeholders, about specific meeting agenda items that could have significant community impact.
- Appropriate committees and/or departments should conduct public education efforts on significant project or policy decisions, including making publicly available all relevant documents and conducting informational sessions.
- Holding meetings in an appropriate sized and accessible venue, particularly for issues that may generate significant public turnout.
- Slow down or restart the decision-making process if public outreach/input is incomplete or unsuccessful.
- Meeting chairs should welcome public attendees, orient them to both the agenda and committee rules/practices, and make meetings as interactive as reasonably possible.
- Developing online or through meeting sign-up sheets a contact list of residents who have expressed interest in receiving information about the work of a committee.
- Creating and make available (website, libraries, etc.) an up-to-date, detailed list of accessible meeting sites for civic and community groups together with written, consistent fair usage policies governing the use of city-owned buildings (e.g. senior center, schools, etc.) and spaces.

2. The City should assume an ongoing responsibility for explaining the detailed functions and processes of municipal government. Consider the following:

- Create a “Citizens Guide to Northampton City Government” summarizing key aspects of how our government is organized and the processes through which decisions are made. A separate citizen guide focusing specifically on development and zoning issues may also be considered.
- Continue and expand “cityschool” and consider a video version for a wider reach.
- Create a “public information” staff position with a mandate to inform and educate the public as early as possible about significant new initiatives or changes in policy or governance. This staff person could also run an ongoing “cityschool” program, help advertise board openings, manage the City’s web site, and staff a re-formed Citizens Advisory Committee (see Recommendation 8) or ongoing Best Practices Committee.
- Collaborate with neighborhood groups/associations to maximize education and communication.
- Provide a standard, comprehensive orientation and training for all committee appointees.
- Expand Northampton Community Television (NCTV) coverage of city government.

3. The Mayor, Finance Committee, and Finance Director should assume an ongoing responsibility for explaining the City’s annual budget in detail. Consider the following:

- Build a formal public education and input component into the budget process.
- Make all financial and budgetary documents generated by the City easily accessible, including salaries, budget requests, line item budgets, monthly line item updates, internal transfers of money or property, external and internal audit reports, all contracts over \$5,000, collective bargaining agreements, and a detailed capital budget plan illustrating current and proposed indebtedness.
- The Superintendent of Schools and the School Committee should build a formal public education and input component into their budget process and make a detailed, line item budget available to the public.
- The Board of Public Works, working with the DPW Director, should build a formal public education and input component into their budget process that includes line item expenditures and a clear explanation of the enterprise funds they oversee.

4. The City of Northampton should improve its website to be more user-friendly, ensure greater consistency in the posting of public documents (e.g. agendas, minutes, committee reports, etc.), and increase its overall effectiveness for public communication. Consider the following:

- An easily accessible calendar function listing meetings of all Northampton governmental bodies with links to supporting documents, minutes and current agendas.
- Expanding ways for interested citizens or groups to “sign up” electronically to receive agendas and minutes for any board or committee. Investigate implementing “Really Simple Syndication” (RSS) feeds to automate the process.
- Individual committee or departmental pages should include organizational descriptions, mission statements, contact information for the members and staff, as well as any written rules or standard practices for each body, including information about public input practices for each organization and/or type of meeting. Any legal requirements for particular meeting types could be pointed out as well.
- The website should complement the City’s efforts to educate citizens about their government by including access to the information referenced in earlier recommendations (e.g. Citizens Guide to Northampton Government, budget materials, etc.).
- Post a permanent “Volunteers Wanted” feature on the homepage with a direct link to information about committees and positions filled by appointment, current vacancies, how to apply, a volunteer application form, and other relevant information.

5. Review and, if necessary, revise current procedures for making appointments to City committees, boards, commissions, and other positions to ensure that the process is clear, consistent, and democratic and that appointments reflect the diversity of the community. Consider the following:

- Make information on the current membership and appointed terms for each committee, board, and commission more accessible to the public.
- Inform the public in advance about board vacancies and develop an ongoing outreach process to recruit a pool of applicants reflective of the diversity of the community.
- Each committee should have a clear description of the roles and responsibilities of its members as well as desirable skills and knowledge for committee members.
- Limits on terms and multiple appointments should be evaluated and considered for committee appointments.
- The City Council exercising greater oversight of the appointments process via its Committee on Appointments and Evaluations.
- A citizen committee, perhaps a revitalized Citizens Advisory Committee or an ongoing Best Practices Committee, could play a role in evaluating appointment procedures and practices.

6. Commission an independent review of the Office of Planning and Development. Consider the following:

- The Office of Planning and Development (OPD) is among the City's most active government agencies involved in a broad array of planning efforts, projects, and decision-making processes having a significant impact on the public.
- The OPD was the subject of significant public comment and discussion – both favorable and critical – at the Committee's meetings and public forums.
- Given this level of public interest and debate, providing the Office of Planning and Development with an opportunity for an independent review of its organization and practices conducted by consulting professionals could benefit both its staff and the City as a whole.
- Based on input gathered by the Committee, some items for evaluative study may include: role of staff vis-à-vis committee members in conduct of meetings and interaction with public; policy and procedure development and decision-making; timing, role, and engagement of citizens in public review and participation; training/education for staff and committee members on best practices in planning with an engaged public; identifying opportunities to educate the public without unduly burdening limited staff resources.
- Other major departments (DPW, Fire Department, Assessors, etc.) have greatly benefited from similar external reviews, serving to affirm their strengths and constructively identify areas for improvement.

7. Create a Vision/Mission Statement for city government that prioritizes citizen engagement and participation, ethical behavior, and best practices in decision-making. Consider the following:

- Adopt a City Council resolution publicly affirming Northampton’s ongoing commitment to these important issues and ideals and circulate this resolution among all city employees, officials, boards, and committees.
- Adopt a local public ethics ordinance similar to those currently being developed for state government and in other municipalities.

8. Designate a standing committee to continue the work begun by the Ad Hoc Committee on Best Practices to improve city decision-making and promote public participation. Consider the following:

- Review and revise the currently unutilized “Citizens Advisory Committee” ordinance established under Chapter 22, Article II of the Northampton Code of Ordinances and revitalize the CAC.
- Create a permanent Best Practices Committee that could conduct public outreach and, ongoing research, and make recommendations to the Mayor and City Council.

9. Review City Council rules and procedures, and City ordinances, in relationship to best practices goals and guidelines. Consider the following

- Access to adequate resources for research and support services.
- Providing independent legal counsel.
- Review Council Rules, including alternative approaches to facilitating public comment and feedback at City Council meetings.

10. Initiate a comprehensive review of the City Charter both to see if general modernization of the document is warranted and to examine several areas of expressed public concern about our current structure of government. Consider the following:

- The role of the Mayor in City Council and School Committee meetings (e.g. chairing meetings, setting agendas, etc.)
- City Council powers and responsibilities.
- Committee composition and appointment authority.
- Term-limits for elected officials.