



Ad-Hoc Committee on Best Practices in Northampton Decision-Making

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TO: Ad Hoc Committee
FROM: Bob Reckman & David Narkewicz
DATE: August 28, 2008
RE: Research on Best Practices in other communities

The City Council resolution creating the Ad Hoc Committee on Best Practices in Northampton Decision-Making stipulated that our work must “include the study of relevant decision-making best practices in other selected municipalities.”

Our research of best practices in other municipalities is divided into three sections:

- (I) Comprehensive efforts to improve municipal decision-making and public participation;
- (II) Decision-making practices from other communities;
- (III) Links to additional research and resources on governmental best practices.

SECTION I. COMPREHENSIVE EFFORTS TO IMPROVE MUNICIPAL DECISION-MAKING AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION.

Portland, Oregon

The Portland City Council adopted a resolution on February 7, 1996 that reads:

As elected officials and staff of the City of Portland, we believe that effective citizen involvement is essential to good governance. We believe a respectful and informed exchange of ideas between the City and citizens will result in the best policies and decisions for all of Portland. To this end, the City of Portland commits itself to promote and sustain an environment that creates and responds to citizen involvement.

We hold that the success of citizen involvement depends on:

- *Mutual respect of all parties;*
- *Broad-based outreach to inform and involve citizens;*
- *Commitment and skills to effectively facilitate, receive, and respond to citizen input and involvement;*
- *Coordination of outreach and involvement efforts of all City bureaus.*

To carry out our commitment, we adopt these guiding principles of citizen involvement:

- Value civic involvement as essential to the health of the city.
- Promote on-going dialogue with citizens by maintaining relationships with neighborhood and community groups.
- Respect and encourage citizen participation by ensuring that City communications and processes are understandable.
- Reach out to all our communities to encourage participation which reflects Portland's rich diversity.
- Think creatively and plan wisely, using citizen involvement processes and techniques to best fit the goals of the particular project.
- Seek early involvement of citizens in planning, projects, and policy development.
- Consider and respond to citizen input in a timely manner, respecting all perspectives and insights.
- Commit to coordinate City bureaus' outreach and involvement activities to make the best use of citizens' time and efforts.
- Evaluate and report on the effectiveness of City outreach efforts to achieve the quality of City/citizen collaboration critical to good governance.
- Promote education of citizens in neighborhood and community groups, and City officials and staff in community organizing, networking, and collaboration.
- Provide financial and technical support to Portland's neighborhood association network as the primary channel for citizen input and involvement.

The Portland Development Commission (PDC) subsequently prepared an 80 page "Public Participation Manual" that is downloadable at www.pdc.us. The manual addresses questions such as why public participation is important and when it should happen. The manual has checklists that can be used to determine what types of projects require what levels of public participation and provide guidelines for public officials to identify different stakeholder groups and how best to involve them early on in the process.

The manual includes guidelines to determine levels of public interest and what level of public participation is necessary. There are also guidelines to identify public participation tools, roles and responsibilities of all parties and to evaluate the success of public participation. There are also extensive meeting/event planning and logistics suggestions and a bibliography. Below is the full table of contents of the manual:

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More recently, the Portland City Council voted in February 2008 to establish a “Public Involvement Advisory Committee” to continue the City’s efforts to improve citywide public participation. The City also adopted a “Five Year Plan to Increase Community Involvement”, a comprehensive roadmap to strengthen Portland’s civic life by increasing the number and diversity of people involved in their communities, strengthening community capacity, and increasing community impact on public decisions.

Committee member Bob Reckman spoke with Affifa Ahmed-Shafi in Portland, which is a City of about 550,000. She is very central in their public involvement process. Ms. Ahmed-Shafi indicated that this issue came to the fore in the 1970s around citizen opposition to some new freeways. The City has now adopted a model set of procedures to solicit community input. There are 95 different community groups in Portland that have opportunities to weigh in on public issues. They have a workbook that helps City employees decide what level of community input is appropriate for particular decisions and suggests ways to achieve this input. The City of Portland also pays about \$2,000,000 to provide support services to 7 regional groups into which the City is divided. In Portland, public participation is mandated by the state for planning decisions but not on other matters. They have continued to develop their public input process and have recently issued several new sets of guidelines for this. Ms. Ahmed-Shafi is sure that soliciting public input results in better public decisions.

Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

The City of Vancouver initiated a Public Involvement Review process in 1998 to enhance public participation in City government and decision-making. A 19-page Policy Report on the process was created in July 1999 and is available online at:

<http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/commsvcs/planning/pubinvolveguide/pirjly99.htm>.

The report begins by reiterating Vancouver's goals of improving public participation at both the citywide and department levels. It notes the importance of cooperation and communication between City departments, Boards and Service Groups. Since some departments have more resources and experience in effectively fostering public participation their skills should be shared with departments that lack such expertise. The report has sections dealing with Individual Department Improvements, Developing a Corporate Framework for Public Involvement, Improving City Public Involvement Skills, Improving Community Contact, Creating Better Civic Awareness and Understanding of How the City Works, and creating a Multicultural Outreach and Translation Strategy.

There are a dozen "Directions for Improvement" and a set of 6 Guiding Principles for Public Involvement: 1) Mandating the process; 2) Resourcing the Process; 3) Process Participants; 4) Communication Strategies; 5) Involvement Strategies; and 6) Closure. The report includes a series of charts that tie together the 6 sections with the 12 directions.

Finally, there is a section on Evaluation Criteria. This sets out specific questions to be answered about each of the 6 sections listed above. It also includes some overarching criteria. These are "Did the process contribute to the development of long term relationships between the participants and the proponent?" and "Are there some types of municipal issues which normally do not have public involvement components but which should?"

Committee member Bob Reckman spoke with Janice MacKenzie, who is Director of Public Access and Council Services for the City of Vancouver. The City of Vancouver has a population of about 600,000. Metro Vancouver is about 2 million. Vancouver has a very diverse population. This means that outreach and translation requirements are more difficult than in a location with a more homogeneous population. Public outreach and involvement is so embedded in their regular operations that Ms. MacKenzie was unable to guess how much money they spend on this. She said that when they began many years ago some departments were better at this than others, especially planning. Now even the new civil engineers understand the importance of soliciting public input early in the process. Even their budget has a public comment component. Like her counterpart in Portland, Ms. MacKenzie is a strong supporter of broad and effective public participation.

SECTION II: DECISION-MAKING PRACTICES FROM OTHER COMMUNITIES

Public Comment Procedures at City Council Meetings

- West Springfield, MA: City Council meetings include a “Public Speak Out” session with a 5-minute time limit on citizen comments. Separate public hearings are also conducted later in the agenda for consideration of ordinances that also allow opportunity for public comment.
- South Portland, ME: Two “citizen discussion” periods at City Council meetings allow the opportunity for citizens to comment on items on or off the agenda. The item is divided between into two times at the beginning and end of regular business for the convenience of the public. Any member of the public may speak once during either segment but not both.
- Alamo-Heights, TX: There are several ways for citizens to be heard by the City Council during regular Council meetings. Agenda item “Citizens to be Heard” provides the opportunity for any member of the public to speak on any topic that is not on the posted meeting agenda. There is also an opportunity to speak on specific agenda and public hearing items as those items are announced. Comments are limited to three (3) minutes unless extended by the Mayor/Presiding Officer.
- Tacoma, WA: When the City Council suspends its rules to include a new resolution or ordinance on the agenda, public comment will be taken at the time the Council considers the resolution or ordinance. Where an ordinance has been substantially changed at its final reading, subject to the consent of the Council, a person may speak to the changes.
- Missoula, MT: City Council Rule 15, Citizen Participation in Decision-Making. Before the consideration of any final action at a City Council meeting, committee meeting or subcommittee meeting, a reasonable opportunity for public comment shall be provided. The Presiding Officer may reasonably limit audience participation at any time. After public comment has been heard, and an appropriate motion has been made, the Council shall debate the action

Responsiveness to Citizen Questions and Input

- West Springfield, MA: In addition to allowing public comment at Town Council meetings, citizens may also submit written questions on a form provided for that purpose. The Council President reviews the questions and assigns a Councilor to follow up with a response in a timely manner.

- Somerville, MA: The City of Somerville was the first community in the nation to implement a “311” Constituent Service telephone system allowing residents and visitors to dial one number to make service requests, obtain valuable information about City or neighborhood services, or be connected with a specific department.
- Arlington, MA: Maintains an online “Request/Answer Center” on the city’s web site that allows citizens to ask questions, make requests for service, and search a database of frequently asked questions. Users of the system can create an online account to check on the status of their requests.
- Vancouver, Washington: The City employs a Citizen Advocate/City Ombudsman to address complaints and improve the responsiveness to those complaints. The Citizen Advocate specializes in handling unusual and complicated grievances, often coordinating the efforts of several City departments to find a solution.
- North Andover, MA: Employs a “Permitting Ombudsman” to mediate problems and disputes between permit applicants and City agencies.

Methods for Communicating Information to Citizens

- Longmeadow, MA: Provides an electronic “Community Bulletin Board” on its website with separate calendars for town government meetings, school meetings, and community/civic organizations.
- Concord, MA: One of several cities and towns in Massachusetts that regularly post all meeting notices on both its Town Hall Bulletin Board (as required under MA Open Meeting Law) and an online “Meeting Calendar” for official town meetings.
- Kingston, MA: One of several cities and towns in Massachusetts to implement a *Connect-CTY*® telephone system that allows city officials to notify residents about public emergencies (e.g. flooding, snow emergencies, power outages, etc.) as well as perform community outreach (town meeting announcements, interactive surveys.)
- Lowell, MA: One of several cities and towns with a government-sponsored blog designed to provide ongoing information about City programs and policies written by the Town Manager. Citizens may post comments to the blog.

Appointment Processes for City Boards and Commissions

- Worcester, MA: Created a “Citizen Advisory Council” to publicize, as widely as possible throughout the community, vacancies on many municipal boards,

commissions and advisory committees. The Council actively recruits nominees for these boards, accepts all applications, and submits recommendations for appointments to the City Manager, the appointing authority for the City of Worcester. The Council seeks at all times to open up the process of appointment to all social, economic, racial and ethnic groups residing in the community.

- Fall River, MA: The City Council enacted an ordinance in December 2007 requiring the Mayor to fill any terms on city boards or commissions within six (6) months of their expiration.
- Chelsea, MA: The City's web site features an application for appointment to boards and commissions that can be filled out and submitted online.
- Minneapolis, MN: The City uses an "open appointment" process to insure a fair and unbiased selection for citizen participation on the City's Boards and Commissions. When an opening occurs on a board or commission, a vacancy notice is published on the City's website. Process includes outreach to neighborhood organizations, recruitment, and public notification. Applications to these boards and commissions are accepted by the City Clerk's Office.
- Pittsburgh, PA: The City Council adopted a "Fair Representation in Appointments to Boards, Authorities, and Commissions" ordinance outlining a set of informational and procedural requirements for ensuring more openness and diversity in appointments to decision-making bodies. Also requires an annual reporting of demographic information (gender, age, race, etc.) about applicants and appointees.

Educating Citizens About Governmental Decision-Making Processes

- Barnstable, MA: "Inside Barnstable Town Government: A Citizen's Leadership Academy" is an 11-week course with the goal of educating the citizens of Barnstable about the operations of their town government, while also obtaining valuable feedback and participation from those citizens. Topics includes history of town government, regulatory services, finance department, etc.
- Chelsea, MA: Published an 8-page "Guide to Public Participation in the Zoning Board of Appeals and Planning Board Process" to "provide greater opportunities for including the voices of citizens in decision making".
- Vancouver, British Columbia: The City created a "Newcomer's Guide To Vancouver" and a "How To Participate In City Processes Guide". Both guides were created as part of Vancouver's Public Involvement Review Initiative cited in Section I.

- Franklin, MA: The Town developed a 9-page “Best Development Practices Guidebook” to provide citizens, businesses, developers and project reviewers with a clear set of guidelines to improve the quality of development in Franklin.

Municipal Budgeting and Financial Management

- Newton, MA: The City of Newton appointed a Blue Ribbon Commission in 2006 of citizens skilled in management and finance to review to all aspects of Newton’s projected financial resources and expenses so that citizens and officials alike may have a better idea of what to expect in the next few years. A final report was presented to the Mayor and Board of Alderman.
- Lawrence, MA: Lawrence Community Works (LCW) initiated a resident-led campaign to catalyze community participation in the City of Lawrence budget process and to change the way decisions are made about local resource allocation. The effort led to the publication in 2005 of *“Our Money, Our Future, Our Right to Know: The People’s Guide to the Lawrence City Budget”*, a 72-page bilingual publication that sheds light on the city’s budget, where the money comes from, what it funds, who decides how it’s spent and what opportunities there are for residents to get involved.
- Somerville, MA: The City of Somerville implemented a “program based” budgeting system that links costs and revenues to the service delivery activities and goals of departments. It also launched the “SomerStat” program to assess service delivery, determine opportunities for improvement, and institutionalize communication among decision-makers to identify and address problems. “ResiStat” brings residents into the conversation
- Easton, MA: The Town’s “Smart Budget Dollars Program” provided municipal employees in Easton with a formal system to suggest ideas that will save money or increase productivity, and to receive a cash award for those ideas. The program was credited with generating more than \$250,000 in savings during its first year. The City of Fall River, MA recently launched a similar program based on Easton’s model that is underwritten by private business sponsors.

Procurement and RFP Processes

- Westfield, MA: The City’s web site features a “Solicitation Center” page providing information on requests for procurement bids and quotes, including copies of the solicitations, issue dates, due dates, and status (open or closed).
- Needham, MA: The Town’s web site includes a “Bid and Contract Opportunities” page that provides searchable information about municipal

bidding and contracting with online access to RFPs and information on number of bids, deadlines, etc.

- Cambridge, MA: The City created a 10-page downloadable guide entitled, "How To Do Business With The City of Cambridge" that includes information about the bidding and procurement process for potential contract businesses and vendors.

Town/Gown Relations

- Cambridge, MA: In 1991, a Mayor's Committee on University-Community Relationships issued a report addressing the relationship between the Cambridge community and the educational institutions that play an important role in the City's landscape and economy. One of the Committee's adopted recommendations was that the Planning Board conducts an "annual joint review of university and community needs and plans." Every year each school submits a Town Gown Annual Report, followed by a presentation to the Cambridge Planning Board.
- Blacksburg, VA: A "Town Gown Community Relations Committee" was formed in 1999 consisting of representatives from the Town of Blacksburg, Virginia Tech University, university neighbors, business, and community service organizations. The group meets monthly and maintains a web site at www.towngown.net.
- Mansfield, CT: Maintains a "Town/University Relations Committee" with a mission to promote and sustain positive relations between the University of Connecticut and the larger Mansfield community. The committee is comprised of representatives from both the Town and the University, and is co-chaired by the Mayor and the Special Assistant to the University President. Members of the public are encouraged to attend the meetings, which include an opportunity for public comment.

SECTION III: LINKS TO ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND RESEARCH ON GOVERNMENTAL BEST PRACTICES

- *AmericaSpeaks*; Engaging Citizens in Governance (<http://www.americaspeaks.org>)
- Animating Democracy (<http://www.artsusa.org/animatingdemocracy>)
- Best Practices Database, U.S. Conference of Mayors (<http://www.usmayors.org/bestpractices>)
- Best Practices in Local Government, Municipal Research Services Center of

Washington (<http://www.mrsc.org/Subjects/Management/bestpractices.aspx>)

- Center for Best Practices, National Governors Association (<http://www.nga.org/portal/site/nga/menuitem.50aeae5ff70b817ae8ebb856a11010a0/?vgnnextoid=e0dcaf4def7d0010VgnVCM1000001a01010aRCRD>)
- Community Involvement Techniques, SMARTe.org (<http://www.smarte.org/smarte/resource/sn-community.xml;jsessionid=hjil8q40idpl>)
- The Community Problem- Solving Project @ M.I.T. (<http://www.community-problem-solving.net>)
- Consensus Building Tools for New Challenges at the State and Local Levels, National Policy Consensus Center (http://www.policyconsensus.org/publications/reports/consensus_building_tools.html)
- Council for Excellence in Government (<http://www.excelgov.org/>)
- deliberative-democracy.net (<http://www.deliberative-democracy.net/>)
- Effective Public Participation and Communication, Municipal Research and Services Center of Washington (<http://mrsc.org/Subjects/Governance/legislative/communication.aspx>)
- Encourage Community and Stakeholder Collaboration, SmartGrowth.org (<http://www.smartgrowth.org/about/principles/principles.asp?prin=10&res=1024>)
- Five Year Plan to Increase Public Participation in Portland (<http://www.portlandonline.com/mayor/index.cfm?c=46442>)
- Governmental Best Practices, Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies (http://pdx.edu/media/i/m/ims_bestpractices.pdf)
- Government Innovators Network (<http://www.innovations.harvard.edu/>)
- Guiding Principles for Public Involvement, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada (<http://city.vancouver.bc.ca/commsvcs/planning/pubinvolveguide/pirjly99.htm#Guiding%20Principles%20for%20Public%20Involvement>)
- Innovation Awards, Massachusetts Municipal Association (http://www.mma.org/?option=com_content&task=view&id=1279&Itemid=230)
- National Issues Forums (<http://www.nifi.org>)
- New Tools for Community Design and Decision Making (<http://www.smartgrowthtools.org/TCDDM/HOME2.htm>)
- PortsmouthListens (<http://portsmouthlistens.org>)
- PlaceMatters (<http://placematters.org>)

- Public Involvement Advisory Council, Portland, OR
(<http://www.portlandonline.com/oni/index.cfm?a=199111&c=25967>)
- Public Participation Manual, Portland Development Commission
(http://www.pdc.us/pubs/inv_detail.asp?id=820&ty=57)
- Townboard.org (<http://www.townboard.org/index.html>)
- Town Gown Relations, Cambridge, MA
(<http://www.cambridgema.gov/cdd/cp/tg/index.html>)
- Working Smarter in Community Development, MIT Dept. of Urban Studies
(<http://web.mit.edu/workingsmarter>)