

## **Special Committee on Council Processes**

### **2024 Year-End Report to Council**

Submitted by Isabel Piedmont-Smith, Chair

The Special Committee on Council Processes met ten times in 2024. Its membership was initially comprised of Councilmembers Flaherty, Piedmont-Smith (chair), Rana, and Rollo. After the first meeting, Councilmember Asare replaced Rana on the committee. The committee discussed three major areas of interest this year: city boards and commissions, council meetings, and equity in city government.

## **I. City Boards and Commissions**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The committee systematically reviewed the purpose/mission statements of all the non-statutory resident boards and commissions of the city (in other words, those not dictated by state code). Initial feedback on the language in BMC was solicited by Stephen Lucas in fall 2023, and these comments were incorporated into our review in summer/fall 2024. The three commissions proposed to be merged into the Advisory Transportation Commission were excluded at that time. After our initial review and suggestions, proposed changes were sent to board and commission liaisons for the bodies' review. In addition to the review of mission/purpose statements, we proposed to add in requirements for annual reports to the mayor and council where they did not already exist. We voted on a slate of Title 2 changes at our November meeting, and these will be coming forward to the council soon.

### **OTHER DISCUSSIONS**

We also discussed how boards and commissions could better contribute to city goals. The council could directly ask relevant bodies to make policy recommendations, or it could refer items to them for research or public engagement. There was agreement that we should ask the bodies to focus their work product on recommendations to the council (and mayor) for concrete action.

The committee continued the 2023 conversations about training and onboarding for both board and commission liaisons and resident members. For liaisons, the Hamilton administration had developed a Pre-Meeting Guidance and Checklist document (including Open Door Law rules), but further training has stalled as the new administration settled in. We discussed that subsequent, systematic training for liaisons is needed, as well as periodic check-ins after training to discuss and implement best practices, and a special focus on record-keeping. We also want to make sure that resident members receive training not just on the specific missions and tasks of the relevant body, but also on how best to communicate with the council, the administration, the public, and other boards/commissions. We felt the new Deputy Clerk position in the City Clerk's office would certainly help in coordinating training and onboarding. This position was one recommendation from the organizational assessment done by the Novak Consulting Group as detailed in their report released in January 2022.

The merger of the Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety Commission, the Traffic Commission, and the Parking Commission into one Advisory Transportation Commission was presented to us at our October meeting by Ryan Robling. This merger was another recommendation from the Novak report. We also talked again about a board/commission member code of conduct but didn't get very far on this topic.

## II. City Council Meetings

### RECOMMENDATIONS

At a regular session on June 12, the committee proposed to the council to convert three regular sessions into deliberative meetings, specifically on Aug. 14, Sept. 11, and Nov. 13. This motion was unanimously approved, and "Consensus-Building Activities" were held on those dates. The first two meetings were focused on getting public input, while the last one was a discussion among Councilmembers.

Looking forward to 2025, the committee discussed scheduling two regular sessions per month and one deliberative session per month in place of the current schedule of three regular sessions per month. We also talked about scheduling council committee meetings (either standing committees or committee of the whole) for consideration of legislation, which would allow **deliberation** while regular sessions only allow **debate**. Both goals were accomplished to some degree with CM Piedmont-Smith's proposed 2025 schedule, which was adopted by the council on December 4. In this schedule, there are regular sessions on the first and third Wednesdays of the month, with the second Wednesday set aside for either a committee meeting or a deliberative session.

### OTHER DISCUSSIONS

The committee sees deliberative sessions as an option to serve various purposes, at various points in the legislative process, as follows:

- Discussion of a community problem and possible solutions (before any legislation is considered)
- Developing legislation (problem is already identified and actions proposed)
- Legislation that has already had a first reading but needs more public and CM discussion

We also talked about who would decide the topic and format of deliberative sessions, one idea being that the council president could decide, and another (not necessarily conflicting) idea that any Councilmember could propose a topic and a format and make a motion during the scheduling portion of a regular session, which the council would then vote on.

Committee members agreed that we need professional assistance to run deliberative sessions. It was suggested that we learn from the Community Voices for Health in Monroe County process conducted in 2020-22. The Community Justice and Mediation Center (CJAM) helped with the first two "CBA" sessions and could be asked to do so again, but other resources could be used as well. There was concern about the work load on the council president or any CM volunteer who agrees to coordinate the session unless we have considerable professional

assistance (at least for public-focused deliberation). Finally, we all agreed on the importance of deliberative sessions leading to action, lest everyone find them a waste of time.

At our last meeting, we discussed the agenda item “Reports from the Mayor and City Offices” in BMC. This year, the council president has included reports from non-profits the city partners with as well, so it was suggested to loosen BMC language for this item. In general, we felt that there was too much detail in Title 2 about council agendas. Also, we need to look at outcomes of these reports. If the goal of the reports is council action, then the desired action should be specified by the presenter(s). If the goal is just to inform the council and the public, there may be better ways to accomplish this than a ten-minute (maximum) report during a council meeting.

#### **RELATED WORK OUTSIDE THE COMMITTEE**

Note that there was work done outside the Special Committee on Council Processes related to council meetings in 2024. The council held a work session about public comment during council meetings on April 30. On June 5, Ord. 2024-13 was adopted; it clarified public comment time limits and placed first readings before second readings on the standard agenda in BMC. On June 18, Ord. 2024-16 was adopted; it placed a five-minute time limit on Councilmember comment on items of legislation, with an additional two minutes for rebuttal.

### **III. Equity in City Government**

At our last meeting of the year, the committee discussed an equity framework for city government. In 2021-22, at the behest of the Clerk and Mayor, a ten-month equity training course was conducted via Zoom for council members, department heads, and Office of the Mayor staff, but there was no systematic follow-through. We discussed the goal to develop, in collaboration with the mayor’s administration, a definition of equity and a structure for incorporating equity into all city practices, policies, and legislation. A good start would be a legislative equity assessment tool to be used for all legislation coming to the council, similar to the fiscal impact statement that is currently required. The committee talked about how to define desired goals and outcomes, as well as how to measure progress. Adding equity goals to the Comprehensive Plan would be a good way to show commitment and get us started. We would need professional consultants to help us define and then set up a framework to achieve our equity goals.

#### **Next Steps**

The committee still has work to do and recommends its continuation as a special committee in 2025, or its conversion into a standing committee of the council. In the coming year, the work regarding boards and commissions can continue with the new Deputy Clerk for Public Engagement. Specifically, the committee could ensure that the council’s interests are represented well in new processes developed via that position. There is still the significant loose end of a code of conduct to adopt as well, to give the council some recourse should a board or commission appointee violate the public trust in some way.

We would also like to continue the steps toward a city-wide equity framework and further develop guidelines for deliberative sessions of various sorts held by the council. There are also several specific concerns about regular session processes that arose in 2024 that have yet to be addressed, such as identification of public commenters on Zoom by name, rules for comment by the administration on legislation or amendments brought by the council, and where in the agenda to place “letters from the council” regarding public policy that impacts Bloomington residents.

The committee’s goal remains to improve the processes and practices of the council to better serve our community.