



City of St. Louis Park

# Boards and Commissions Assessment

June, 2023



# Overview

## Learning Questions

- Why does the program have limited participation from certain demographic and community groups?
- How might the application process be limiting participation?
- How can time spent serving through this program feel meaningful to participants?
- How can program support staff be most effective in their role?

Overall, better align with the city's vision and strategic priorities.

## Approach

- Survey (30)
- Listening sessions and One-on-One Interviews (45)
- Review of charter, commission bylaws, city organizational structure
- Peer city review (3)



# Topline Messages

- There are great building blocks in place. St. Louis Park has the potential to stand out as a leader in this kind of engagement.
- Many cities are taking a look at their Boards and Commissions for much the same reasons as St. Louis Park--wanting to update, ensure relevance, be responsive to new demographics and community trends.
- The program has evolved over many years, as have community needs. As things have changed, gaps have emerged. This is normal and to be expected.
- Adjustments to the program can realign goals and practices to more accurately reflect current strategic priorities.
- The themes, implications, and recommendations are things to be worked through over time, not decided on today or all at once.

# What We'll Cover Today

- Themes gleaned from community and staff input
  - Themes are things that came up consistently across respondents. While outliers can be interesting and important, themes are those things around which there appears to be substantial consensus.
- Implications
- Recommendations
- Questions/Discussion



# Themes & Implications

# Theme # 1: We want to help, and we see value...

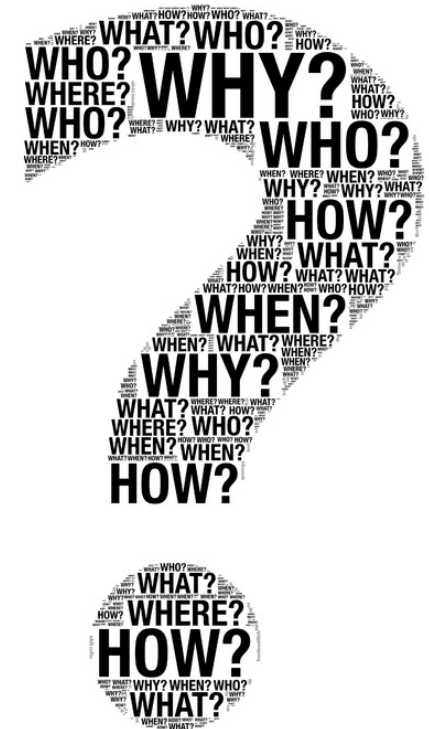
- Respondents see serving as a fruitful way to advance their careers, develop new skills and job prospects, or get involved in local public office.
- Respondents are enthusiastic about the opportunity to learn the inner workings of governing and city functions.
- People want to help and have been hanging on and hoping for things to gel.
- People have stuck with it even through the pandemic.
- There's a strong sense of community identity and community service.





## Theme #2: We don't know what we're supposed to be doing.

- Respondents report that the way the program is run shifts depending on city leadership (Council and staff).
- Respondents wonder what their role is in relation to the Council, City Manager, City Staff, and community. They wonder if they are supposed to be giving input, and if so to whom and how.
- This uncertainty sometimes results in preventing or slowing momentum.
- Lack of clarity hinders the ability of community partners to promote the program and help recruit new commissioners



# Theme #2: We don't know what we're supposed to be doing (continued).

- Respondents (staff, commissioners) connected to Planning/BOZA and the Housing Authority are very clear on their purpose and scope, as a result of clear parameters and statutory requirements. The rest of the respondents are less clear.
- There is lack of clarity about Council expectations, needs, and motivations for engaging community through this program.
- While many respondents said it was nice to have latitude, the lack of guidance or structure from Council also makes people feel rudderless or without focus.







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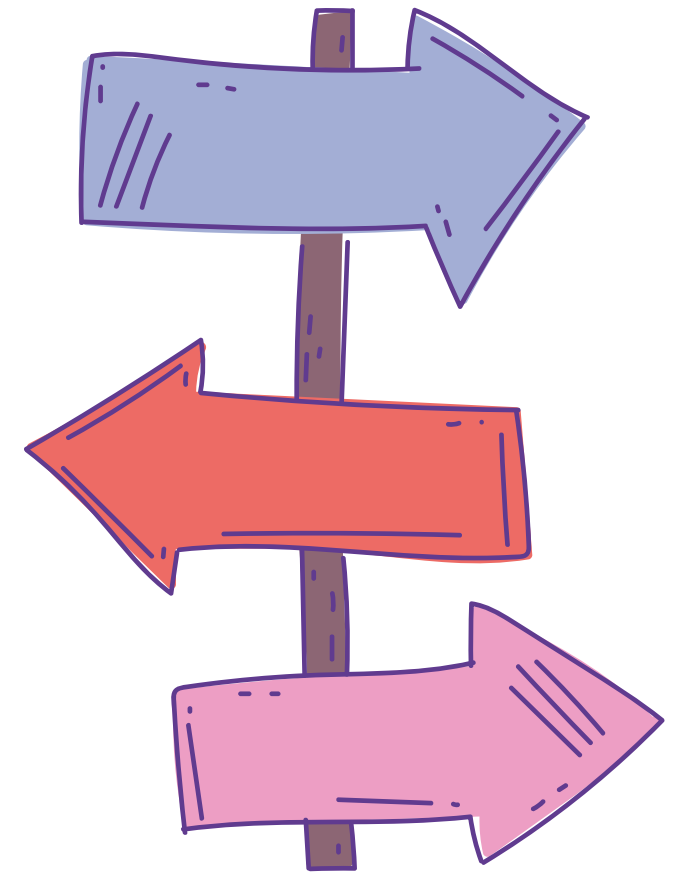
*...It's frustrating that we simply don't have a purpose. We have no power or responsibility.*

*...The most challenging thing is understanding what's expected of the commission and how we could better help the city.*

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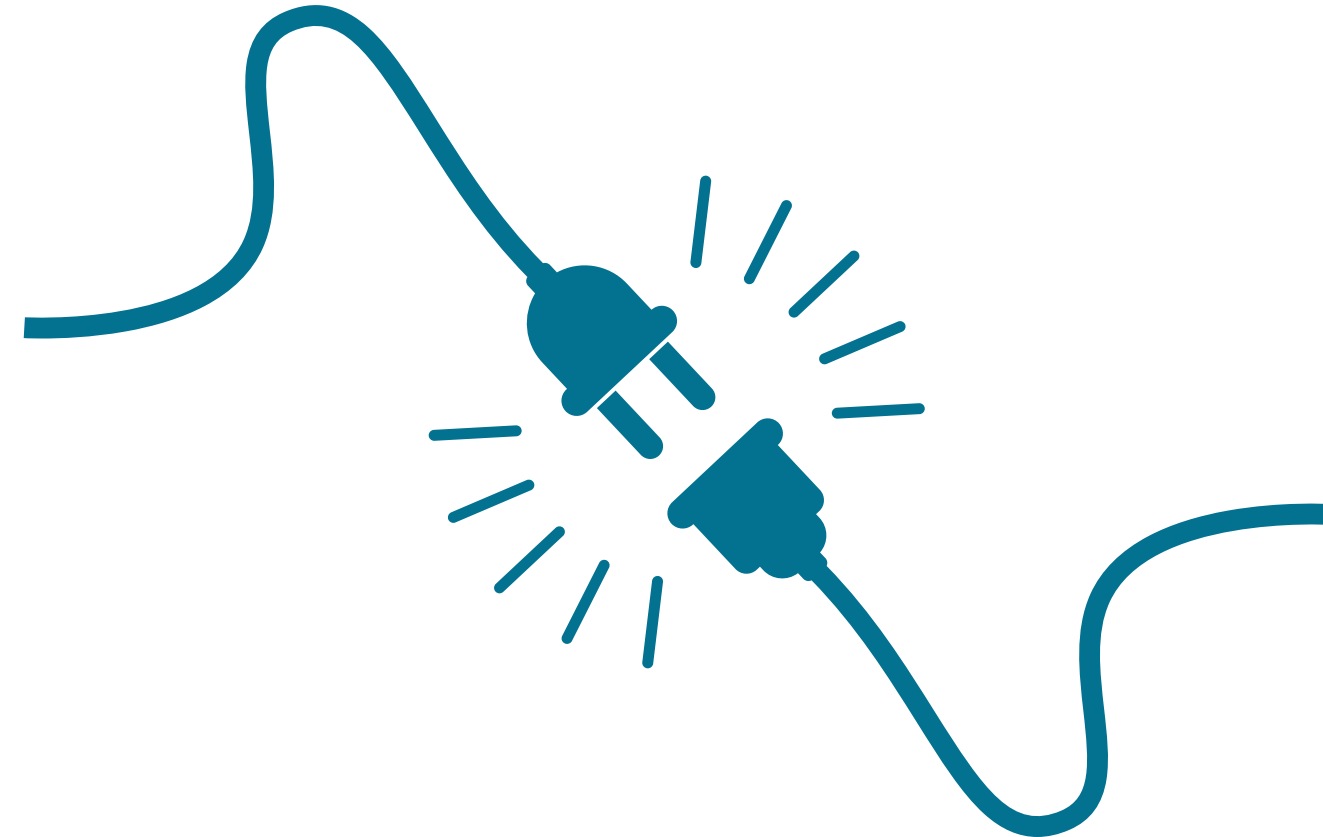
## Theme #3: We get mixed messages.

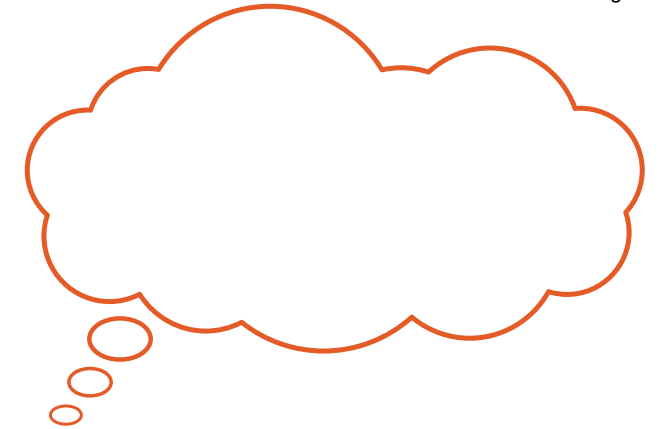
- Respondents describe confusion about what they view as mixed messages. For example:
  - "You're here to advise council" but they rarely interact with Council, aren't consistently asked for advice, and there is no reliable mechanism for interaction or workflow--staff is the conduit.
  - "You're an ambassador for the city" but they don't have authority or mechanisms to communicate with the community on the City's behalf.
  - "Commissions are for community input, commissioners represent community perspective" but there are no resources or mechanisms for getting input from community



## Theme #4: We feel disconnected.

- Commissioners only interact with Council once a year (if that), and for a very limited time and purpose.
- For the most part Commissioners don't interact with other Boards/Commissions, even though some of the issues overlap.
- Commissioners feel discouraged from communicating with each other due to perceived limitations of Open Meeting Law





*What's frustrating is the poor communication flows between the three players (the commission, [city staff], and the City Council). We could get a lot more done if there was more transparency.*

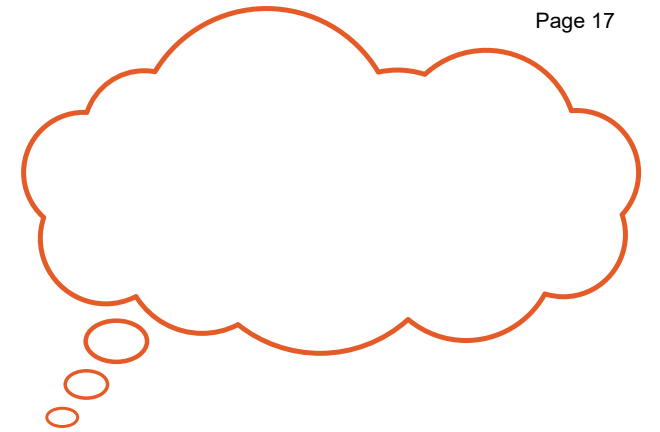
*...I think that commissions are a great way to get people involved, they provide opportunities for Council to be able to delegate things to commissions...But to be effective they need to be tended to by City Council. They need to give us direction. While we are independent, we are desperate to hear what we can do for them. Without their authority, we are less impactful.*



## Theme #5: There aren't systems in place to support us sufficiently.

- There is no standardized onboarding/training
- The workplan process doesn't support the charge of advising city council
- There is not a reliable system in place for being proactive and supporting Council's required needs
- Nor is there a reliable system for being reactive in a timely way as community issues emerge
- Regular evaluation and updating the purpose and relevance of commissions does not occur in a systematic way





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*...Our committee serves no actual purpose. Without any actual guidance from the city, we literally make things up as we go along. Every time someone leaves, there is a brain drain as there is no centralized location to save documents, contact, resources, etc. Worse, we have no way to communicate our work with fellow commissions, nonprofits, like minded groups, potential partners, or curious residents.*

*..I am in a room full of capable people who have no official structure to serve this city in a meaningful way.*

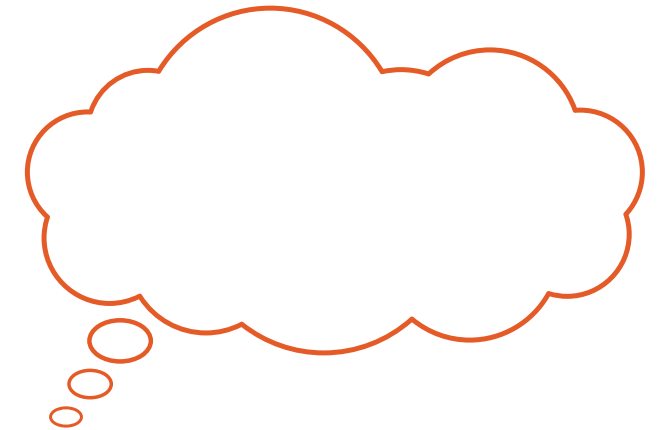
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# Theme # 6: We don't see our impact.

Respondents believe they have a lot to contribute, but they don't feel they are being utilized well.





*...I feel like we plan and discuss a lot of things, but there is not much happening.*

*...We haven't done much of action or community work.*

*..We share our input with staff, but we don't know where that goes or if it's used.*

*...It feels more like I'm just being told what's happening as opposed to being a part of any decision making. More of a rubber stamp than a part of the process.*

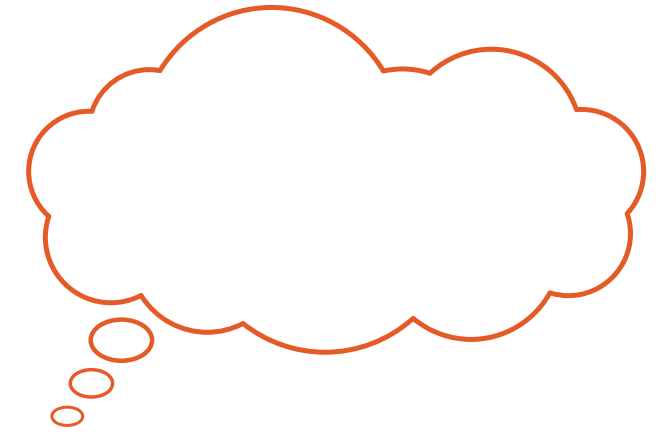


## Theme # 7: Staff is amazing, but they don't have capacity.

Universally, Commissioners rave about their staff liaisons and feel that they go over and above in terms of effort. However, staff and commissioners alike note that this is a tiny piece of the staff liaison's overall job, and they are stretched thin.

In terms of supporting staff liaisons, they don't have consistent onboarding when they start the role, they don't have mechanisms for connecting with one another to compare notes, and there are not opportunities to think broadly about how Commissions can serve the strategic priorities of the City.





*“...Staff is incredibly organized. As someone who is usually the organizer in my professional and personal life, it feels really good to just be able to show up and have really competent people organizing things for us.*

*...It is so much work: attending 2 hour monthly meetings at night, plus workgroups meetings; logistical recording, coordination, contacts list, reserving meeting spaces, tracking attendance, orientation, annual 4 hour retreat, draft agendas...*

*”*

## Theme # 8: It's not a cohesive program.

- There is not cohesion or sense of connection across Boards and Commissions.
- There is not consistency in how commissions operate.
- There is not a well articulated overall strategy.
- No one is responsible for seeing the whole, bringing it all together, and directly linking it to strategic priorities of the city.
- How Boards and Commissions are managed shifts based on the inclinations of whoever is on Council and whoever is city manager. This is natural, but there is not a sense of what needs to remain consistent.

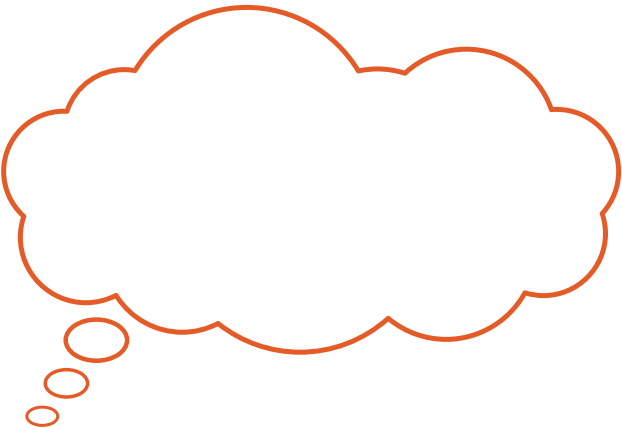


## Theme # 9 It's who you know...and you don't know us [community members of groups currently underrepresented]

- Respondents believe that appointment to commissions is based on who you know, and that the people that are most actively recruited are the people Council and staff already know.
- This mutually reinforces a limited demographic.
- There is little active engagement or relationship-building to widen the pool.







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*I will put in my time, because you are giving me time.*

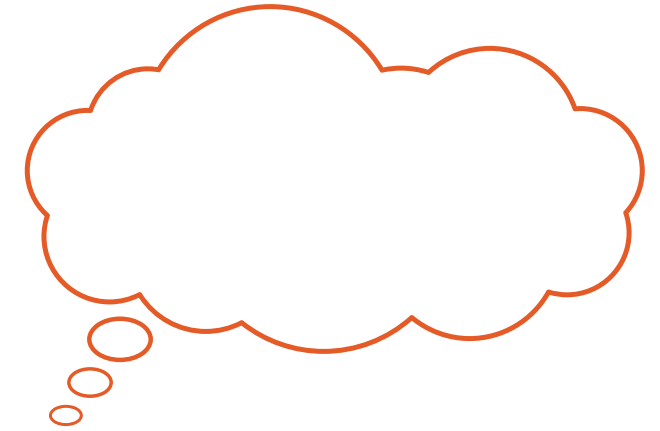
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## Theme # 10: Participation is not easy...

- Virtual participation is prohibited by law.
- There is no food, transportation, or child care considerations.
- The way the meetings are run and set up are not community centric.
- Open Meeting law is cited as a reason for obstacles.
- The overall expectation of the city is that residents should and will come to them, and if they don't, it's assumed that it's because they're not interested or able.





*...Robert's Rules [standard parliamentary procedure] is exclusionary and confusing and makes it difficult to know when and how to speak up. I don't always know when is appropriate for me to challenge or ask questions.*

*...It's frustrating that there's no virtual option.*

*...I'm guessing some people don't participate because of the time of the meetings (mealtimes, evenings), they have kids and need child care.*



# Peer City Reviews--Promising Practices from Robust Programs

- Investing in community relationship building.
  - Housed with community engagement manager with dedicated staff
  - Full-time staff dedicated to supporting commission and liaisons
  - Going to events and community gatherings
- Run meetings in rounds to ensure equal participation.
- Cities we spoke with were actively seeking to build programs that are relevant and compelling for the social and demographic shifts that are underway across the country.
- Unified, systematic, and consistent way to run the selection process, including a standard scoring rubric.



# Peer City Reviews--Youth Engagement

- Work closely with school staff--for instance, a government class teacher includes board/commission service as an option for satisfying class requirements
- Chair takes active role in mentoring youth--orients, answers questions, seats on either side of the chair at every meeting.
- Youth members are voting members
- Youth terms are synchronized with school year, terms are one year



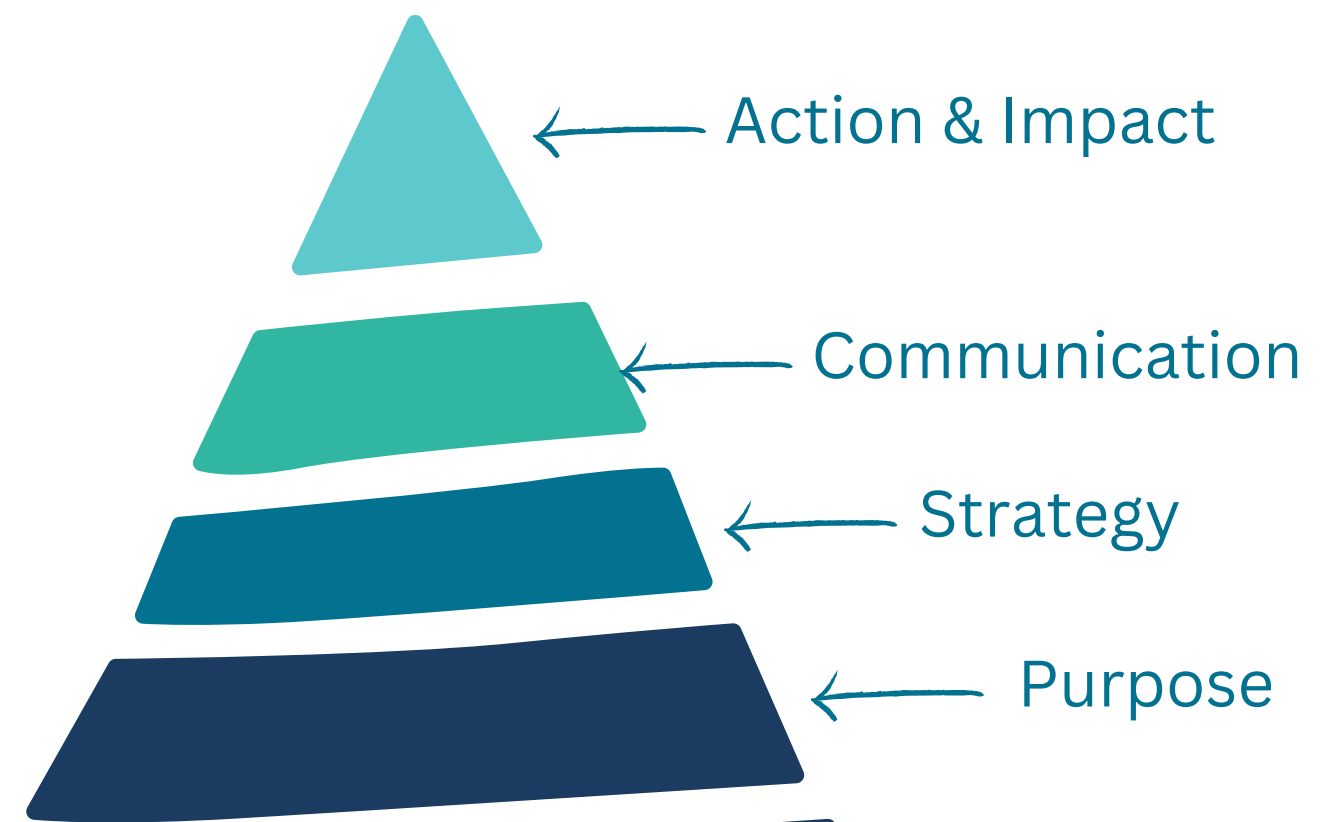


# Implications



# Implications

- Engagement requires resources--human and financial.
  - Engagement is not transactional or passive—it's personal and relationship-centered
  - If you're not getting people with a variety of backgrounds, you're not asking people with a variety of backgrounds. They aren't going to come to you.
- Programs require:
  - Overarching purpose
  - Cohesive strategy
  - Clear, regular communication lines
  - Action and impact



# Implications

- Community-centric programming requires community-friendly practices, using methods that don't feel intimidating, with supports that make it easy to participate.
- There is a tremendous opportunity for St. Louis Park to stand out as Best in Class when it comes to leveraging Boards and Commissions to engage residents in the strategic priorities of the city.





# Recommendations

# Focus On Purpose

Changes and adjustments should be grounded in answers to the following questions; These questions should be revisited at regular intervals.

1 What is the **purpose of engagement?** Why does the city want residents engaged?

2 What is the **purpose of a Boards and Commissions Program?** How does it tie to Strategic Priorities?

3 What is the **purpose of each Board or Commission?**

4 How can a Boards & Commissions Program **tie together/ feel cohesive** for staff, Council, and residents?

In addition, the City should develop a set of considerations that guide their decisions about creating, combining, sunseting, or changing the purpose of all of the Commissions on a regular basis.

# Design Supports That Match Purpose (Form Follows Function)

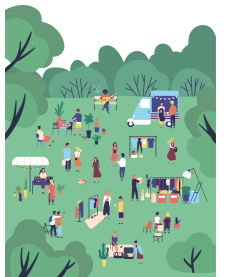
<i>For example, if you want them to...</i>	<i>Then you need to....</i>
Advise council, research issues council is considering, provide input on policy	Have regular interaction with the commissions, identify priorities that you want them to give input on, and resource the commission to do the legwork they need to do to be effective; have mechanisms for regular dialogue
Act as a bridge/ambassador to community members, both providing information to community and getting input from community on priority issues	Resource and support commissioner activities that give information and gather input on a regular basis; build in regular feedback loops directly between commissions and Council
Come up with their own activities and implement them	Provide clear parameters for what fits in their scope, resource and support their activities sufficiently

# Expand the Pool

- In order to have a pool of candidates from diverse communities, it is necessary to be intentional about and committed to building relationships with them.

Consider:

- Tabling at community events and school open houses
- Partnering with school and community leaders who are connected with communities to build awareness of the program; work with school cultural liaisons



- Establish clear measures for tracking diversity (race, gender, age, occupation, location in the city) at each point in the recruitment and appointment process. You measure what you treasure.



- Establish a common appointment rubric that demonstrates the need and value of having better representation and reduces unconscious bias (who you know, favoring those who are most like yourself). A rubric could include a combination of characteristic related to the purpose of the commission, **along** with racial and economic diversity considerations.





# Make The Experience Comfortable and Community-Friendly

- Provide support for communities to participate. This can include providing child care or child care stipends for parent participation; snacks; transit cards; or honorariums to help reimburse participation related expenses.
- Include money in the city budget for the program and be clear and transparent about the resources available. Be explicit about these supports during recruitment and appointment.
- Make meetings more welcoming and comfortable by running them in ways that put people at ease, such as:
  - Explore other facilitation methods such as consensus methods and round robins to ensure equal participation
  - Establish mentoring between commissioners, especially youth members
  - Revisit meeting times, dates, and locations on a regular basis
- Develop standard orientation process, that includes training on how the city functions.



# Staff and Structure for the Long Term

- Create a structure for the work that elevates its profile and positions it to support city work across departments and levels.
  - Creates synergy between strategic priorities and relationships with residents
  - Aligns Boards and Commissions with other community oriented aspects of the city's work
- Hire dedicated community engagement staff who:
  - Supports Boards and Commissions and staff liaisons
  - Cultivates relationships in the community and personally recruits Board and Commission candidates
  - Supports the recruitment and appointment process, including streamlining the steps; builds consistent onboarding and training practices
  - Ensures that the program is cohesive, impactful, meaningful, and tied to strategic priorities
- Establish a budget that includes funds for both Commission activities and community outreach.

