

Charter Commission

April 21, 2021

Minutes

Welcome

Allison welcomed the group and gave overview of the agenda. She informed the group that the meeting will be recorded.

Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty

Commissioner Hardesty stated that she was concerned with coming to the commission in case it might impact or influence the commission's work. She wants the group to hear from as many diverse communities as possible before narrowing down their work focus.

She expressed her concerns with the focus on changing the form of government and cautioned the group not to jump to any conclusions. She believes that with the public financing option available this has helped open up the possibility of successfully being elected to more people.

Commissioner Hardesty challenged the group to reach out to people whose voices are never heard in City Hall to determine what barriers we need to remove for them to be heard. She stated that her office is available for any support the commission needs – particularly around maintaining its independence.

Commissioner Hardesty expressed concerns with what the Auditor may ask of the commission – particularly around having an independent budget. Gave example of County Sheriff being an independent office but their budget is still determined by Multnomah County Commissioners.

Commissioner Mingus Mapps

Commissioner Mapps stated that the city is at a crossroads and many in the community think that City Hall is now working. This commission can change that. He stated that his top priorities as a commissioner include:

- COVID-19 recovery - including access to vaccines, housing, helping small businesses recover
- Houselessness – it is important to come together as a community to find innovative solutions
- Public Safety reform – including erasing racism, community members feeling safe in their homes, re-writing police contracts, and empowering the independent police review committee.

He outlined what he sees as the most important issues for the commission to consider, including:

- 1) A fundamental need for reform in the way our government is organized (changing the form of government). This is for several reasons, including the reality that sometimes City commissioners don't work well together. Also, with each commissioner in charge of specific bureaus this leads to cross-bureau conflicts. He gave examples of ways current bureaus are at odds with each other and lacking a shared vision.
- 2) Expanding the number of city council seats. Despite our current Council being the most diverse ever, the limited number of Commissioner seats means that some voices are not able to be at the table.
- 3) Moving to district-based rather than city-wide elections. City-wide elections are incredibly challenging and set too high a barrier to access. One way to help lower the barrier to having diverse voices on the Council is to elect people from specific districts.

Commissioner Mapps stated that his concerns for this commission are that there won't be anyone to champion or move forward the ideas or proposals of the commission to get them across the finish line. He is also concerned that the commission will offer too many changes in one package – which increases the possibility that someone can disagree with one small part and vote no, wasting the chance to make any changes at all for another 10 years.

Question and Answer Time

Question: How does the work you do as the head of a bureau take away from your ability to focus on policy issues? Or, conversely, how does your focus on policy effect your ability to lead a bureau.

Commissioner Hardesty: It's important to have commissioners who are willing to step outside of their own bureaus to raise concerns and advocate for good policy. What people on the Council are more important than the form of government.

Commissioner Mapps: I'm currently working 70 hours a week and devoting half that time to bureau needs and half to policy. This limits the ability to hold the entirety of policy vision in the forefront and still be successful as a bureau leader. There is currently no mechanism to bring the City's vision into focus. As an example, we currently have five active emergency declarations, some of which have been in place for multiple years. An emergency declaration is supposed to be used to break down the barriers between bureau silos. If we are needing multi-year emergency declarations to break those silos down, clearly it tells us that the form of government is at fault.

Question: There are many problems in the city of Portland not relegated to just one bureau's role, what are some obstacles of our form of government to work across bureaus on these big issues.

Comm. Hardesty: an example is climate goals, which actively conflict with revenue sources for some bureaus. Another is that there is no city-wide approach to maintenance funding or maintenance deferrals, leading to some bureaus having massive unfunded maintenance back-logs. However, there is no quick fix for these challenges. A new form of government won't magically fix these concerns. She can't identify any form of government in any major city that actually works.

Comm. Mapps: We have many issues here which cross multiple jurisdictional lines, and every time you add another level of bureaucracy solving those issues becomes even more challenging. Unfortunately, as the head of a bureau commissioner naturally become champions of those bureaus, which can cause conflicts and limit thinking. He would argue that, while other cities may have challenges, Portland is uniquely under performing and form of government is part of that failure.

Question: Is there something special about our form of government that we should hold onto or think twice about before considering other forms?

Comm. Hardesty: Our publicly financed elections system clearly works. Electing people who are steeped in community work is also important. Maybe this group will be innovative enough to come up with an entirely different approach to form of government, not used anywhere else.

Comm. Mapps: Has always been concerned with how any one person can manage all 23 or 24 bureaus. Also concerned that there might not be as much of a focus on equity without a Council ready to champion it.

Question: Why did the last Charter Commission fail?

Comm. Hardesty: They were given no staff, no budget, and no support from elected officials.

Question: How do you balance between legislative roles and administrative roles?

Comm. Hardesty: She knew what the job of commissioner involved when she ran, and was prepared to do both sides of this work. She is concerned that without being in the administrative side of things commissioners might not have access to important data the way they do now.

Comm. Mapps: While our current Council is unique, there is concern that not all commissioners will be able to reject or push back on the missions of a bureau you're in charge of. As a policy maker only, you are more free to do so.

Meeting Chat

18:40:24 From Andrew Speer to All panelists : Thank you Commissioners for your responses and for being with us this evening.

18:41:23 From Andrew Speer to All panelists : I have to leave for another board meeting. Thank you all.

18:47:31 From Commissioner Hardesty to All panelists : My pleasure! I greatly appreciate the invitation!

18:51:54 From Candace Avalos : I know we're low on time and I likely won't get a chance to ask this question, but I'm going to put it in the chat as some food for thought:

The issue I see with the form of government is that it creates a conflict between the commissioners administrative responsibilities and their legislative responsibilities to the voters. Not having separate but equal branches of government seems to be creating this problem. What say you about how to fix this problem if the answer is not changing the form of government?

I feel like we're focusing on the exception, not the rule. Also - even though we have a diverse city council, money still played a big role in who had more access to voters.

18:53:44 From Comm. Streeter to All panelists : I will withdraw my question in the interest of time

18:55:06 From Angela Jones to All panelists : Thank you, both. Appreciate hearing from you

18:57:30 From Robin Ye to All panelists : time allowing, I have a question!

18:57:40 From Robin Ye to All panelists : I don't have the hands raised on my zoom for some reason

18:58:15 From Allison Brown, facilitator to All panelists : Robin, we might not get to it, but maybe you can put it into the chat so it can be documented, or something for the Commissioners to think about?

18:58:30 From Robin Ye to All panelists : You got it

19:01:27 From Robin Ye to All panelists : My question: regarding Outreach: Deeply appreciating the enthusiasm from the Commissioners in our work and commission, I wanted to ask if all Commissioners are prepared to step aside and step back when necessary/strategic from commenting about this independent commission, because part of our opportunity is to reach people in Portland in a way that might resonate with them in a way they wouldn't embrace if it as elected politicians involved and outfront.

19:02:04 From Comm. Streeter : Thank you very much!!

19:02:21 From Raahi Reddy (she/her) : Thank you Commissioner Hardesty and Mapps

19:02:27 From Vadim Mozyrsky to All panelists : Yes, thank you for your time.

19:02:41 From Candace Avalos : Thank you Commissioners!

19:02:51 From Becca Uherbelau to All panelists : Thank you Commissioners.

19:02:56 From Hanna Osman to All panelists : Thank you all

19:02:57 From Comm. Streeeter : It's not so much a question but touches on the issue we were just discussing - how can we build more accountability into how the City is run?

19:03:00 From Yasmin Ibarra : Thank you Commissioner

Questions from Public Attendees

Gary Lietke 06:43 PM - It excites me that expanding the number of representatives on Council can bring more obvious voice of our enormous diversity by providing more seats at the table. We need everyone to hear each other, not just win majority votes.

How do you suggest ensuring that the various groups, not only political, but demographic and beyond, get that voice? Contrast at-large, geographic with multiple representatives, or other, please.

Eric Wilhelm 06:55 PM - How about the vote-splitting in city council races when a lot of candidates have similar platforms and we end up electing someone who doesn't really have broad voter support?

Sara Wolk - Equal Vote Coalition 06:59 PM - Commissioner Hardsy, your campaign was an incredible example of community organizing bridging into grassroots politics. Your method is definitely a model for others, and you proved that it's possible, but I wonder if you still think that running at-large is a barrier or additional obstacle making it harder than it should be for candidates? Or not?