

**Charter Commission
Information Gathering Subcommittee Meeting
with City Bureau Directors
May 21, 2021, 12:00 p.m.
Minutes**

Attendance

Commissioners Present		
Steven Phan	Melanie Billings-Yun	Candace Avalos
Yasmin Ibarra	Bryan William Lewis	Andrew Speer
Becca Uherbelau	Salomé Chimuku	Debbie Kitchin
Vadim Mozyrsky	Anthony Castaneda	Dave Galat

Staff Present		
Name	Name	Name
Julia Meier	Diana Shiplet	Ariella Frishberg (JLA)
Gabe Solmer	Mike Jordan	Chris Warner
Ty Kovatch		

Welcome

Julia welcomed the group, gave an overview of the format for today’s meeting, and reminded everyone that the meeting will be recorded.

Commissioners introduced themselves and stated why they were interested in attending today’s meeting.

Bureau Directors Statements

Chris Warner, Director of Portland Bureau of Transportation (PBOT) – Stated that the bureau was originally the maintenance bureau but eventually integrated transportation planning and in 1984 the bureau as it currently stands was formed. He gave an overview of the work PBOT is responsible for.

PBOT’s budget is mostly non-general fund, but they are also not a rate-based bureau like Water or Environmental services, which means they always struggle to balance the needs of the community with limited or inconsistent revenue. There has been an extra challenge this year due to pandemic-related reductions in revenue. This only exacerbates an already challenging backlog of unfunded maintenance projects.

Chris stated that one negative of the form of government is that there is only one champion of a bureau, which can lead to challenges in trying to get enough Council interest in doing broad, systematic changes.

Gabe Solmer, Director of the Portland Water Bureau (PWB) – Stated that the water bureau was first created in 1895, and since that time she is only the 12th director, and the first female. This small number of directors is highly unusual for the City of Portland. PWB is the largest water provider in Oregon and is almost entirely rate funded.

Ty Kovatch, Deputy Director of PWB – Stated that there aren’t many Charter changes recommended by the PWB, as the current charter mostly gives a good outline for the bureau to work within.

He was originally a chief of staff for a commissioner, which gives him good perspective on the form of government from both a bureau side and a commission office side. Originally, Ty was a proponent of the form of government because it gives direct access to elected officials by the community. However, now he sees the importance of additional representation and the ability to reflect perspectives of all Portlanders. A consolidated, professional, experienced administrator (city manager) can help to guide the City direction versus each bureau getting guidance from five very different commissioners. One negative outcome of the current form of government is that due to commissioner differences and inconsistency in leading, some bureaus have had as many directors in the last 15 years as PWB has had in its entire 120+ year history. This speaks to the overly political nature of the form of government.

Mike Jordan, Director of the Bureau of Environmental Services (BES) – Stated that he’s been a director at the City for 6 years and, other than one other director, he is the most senior director. This speaks to the fragmentation caused by our form of government.

Mike gave an overview of the bureau’s origins – originally PBOT and BES were one bureau, and their work is still very much connected. BES was spun off into its own bureau in order to focus more directly on sewer work and have greater capacity for environmental-related regulatory work.

He stated that BES has one Charter-related challenge in that it is almost entirely rate-funded, but there have been court challenges around how rates can be spent. He would like the group to look at ensuring that the duties assigned to the bureau match with what is defined as “environmental services” in the Charter.

Mike stated that all City offices are living in a culture of fragmentation, from top to bottom due to the form of government. When collaboration is needed this culture makes that challenging because bureaus have to invent the collaboration process first in order to even start the work.

Question and Answer Time

Question: Do the directors have any ideas for a system which could enable better collaboration?

Mike: Gave an example of the West Portland Town Center and how that project involves six or seven different bureaus. In other cities our size, all those bureaus would be in one department and be expected to work together all the time. The current structure inhibits focus on the outcomes of the work.

Ty: The relationship between BES and PWB has radically improved by being under the same commissioner. This largely hasn’t been the case over the years. If bureaus are “pitted against” one another by nature of commissioner assignment, this naturally leads to a lack of inefficiency.

Question: Do the bureaus have capital improvement project planning processes and how might community members engage more in their creation?

Chris: Bureaus currently have a robust planning process, which includes lots of public input. The capital improvement plan (CIP) is more of an asset management program than a decision-making program. Often, it’s funding sources that determine what and when investments can be made.

Mike: CIP process is almost entirely risk based. Plans are made based on a combination of when something might fail and how much of an impact that failure likely will be. Bureaus now are looking at doing “triple bottom line” analysis in order to ensure CIP and other plans are more equitable across all of the city infrastructure.

Gabe: CIPs are 5- or 10-year plans – what is more open to political pressures and public impact is rates. There is always a balance to be found between rates and what projects need to be done to maintain, expand, or retire infrastructure.

Question: We’ve heard a lot about deferred maintenance and the trade-offs or impacts of those decisions – is there anything which can help in a form of government?

Mike: There will always be pressures, no matter what the form of government, due to the elected officials living in 2- to 4-year focus but infrastructure needing to live in 100-year focus. The battle between those two pressures almost always plays out in rate-setting.

Chris: Sometimes we have to make decisions based on the long-term outcomes, which make some issues seem worse in the short term. It’s the challenge of having to maintain a long view of City work.

Question: How do you work through differences between commissioner in charge direction and your bureau’s direction?

Chris: It’s a learning process. We try to educate and make the reason behind decisions as clear as possible. This takes time. Ultimately, though, final decision is always from commissioner in charge.

Question: Seems like it would be necessary to have staff whose only work is to be liaisons between bureaus. Is that an accurate assessment?

Mike: Yes, we do have a staff member whose work is to coordinate with other bureaus. It does take someone who is paying attention to keep track of other bureau work. Also, some bureaus jointly pay for one staff member to help understand each other’s work.

Question: Other directors have suggested a preamble or similar way to add the City’s core values to the Charter. How do you think this could impact your day to day operations?

Mike: BES also suggested the same thing. Since the charter is the city’s constitution and is the people’s voice, any way we can articulate our core values by a means that doesn’t fluctuate with new elected officials is good. Most would agree that this sort of stability is important.

Gabe: Being able to tie things like budget decisions to our values is also important. Connecting core values to employee evaluations would make the values a part of everyday work.

Ty: Leadership ultimately has to make sure that those values are maintained and encouraged.

Question: Is there something in the Charter or in a potential Charter change that would help all bureaus be more accountable to their missions?

Chris: Is fascinated by the discussion of including core values in the Charter. It needs to be more than just a values statement but something which can help directors understand how to move forward or help public to understand the direction City work is going.

Mike: We can do more accountability in a better structure. At the end of the day, we're human and cannot account for everything no matter the structure. We have to come with good faith that we are doing the best for the community and each other. Some of that can be built into a structure but, ultimately, we have to be accountable to each other.

Meeting adjourned

Minutes respectfully submitted,
Diana Shiplet, Executive Assistant to the CAO and CFO

MINUTES DRAFT UNTIL APPROVED BY THE CHARTER COMMISSION

Meeting Chat

12:05:24 From Ariella Frishberg (she/her), facilitation support : Please remember to set your chats to "all panelists and attendees" so that the public can follow along with our conversation.

12:07:25 From Anthony Castaneda to All panelists : Haha all good!

12:09:15 From Ariella Frishberg (she/her), facilitation support : Keeping my video off today as I'm having internet connection issues. Please message me if you're having any technical issues, I'm here to help!

12:10:20 From Becca Uherbelau (she/her) : Hi all, I'm going to be off camera for a bit eating my lunch, but still here and listening intently.

12:17:39 From Comm. Avalos (she/her) : which bureau is this?

12:53:48 From Comm. Chimuku (She/Her) : I would love to speak to those liaisons. Their roles seem important and fascinating

12:58:08 From Comm. Avalos (she/her) : Thank you for that perspective Ty

12:59:06 From Ty Kovatch - PWB to All panelists : Thank you for allowing me to share!

12:59:06 From Vadim Mozyrsky : Thank you for the valuable input!

13:00:11 From Melanie Billings-Yun to All panelists : Thank you so much. Thi smeeeting was very insightful. Unfortunately, I have another meeting and must depart.

13:00:50 From Comm. Avalos (she/her) : I also have to run for another meeting, thanks everyone for the insight

13:01:01 From Comm. Lewis (He/Him) : Thanks so much for your time and great input

13:02:05 From Steven Phan (He/Him) - Comm. : Have to get on another call, thank y'all for all the insight!

13:02:50 From Gabe Solmer : Thanks everyone for your strong work. I feel like we are in good hands.

13:03:09 From Becca Uherbelau (she/her) : Thanks all.

13:03:14 From Yasmin (she/her) : Thank you for your time!