

# MODAL COMMITTEE EVALUATION



09/28/22 – Part 1

## FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATION

Much has changed in Portland transportation since the City Council established the public modal committees for freight, bicycles, and pedestrians, more than 20 years ago. New modes have emerged that were unimaginable a decade ago. Meanwhile, the Portland Bureau of Transportation (PBOT) has increased their focus on equitable engagement and access to decision making and adopted a Vision Zero policy. In recent years, the City adopted new policies for broadening the voices represented on City advisory bodies and set aggressive climate goals. These changes were implemented in 2017 to provide standardized committee operations across all bureaus around term limits, recruiting as well as reinforcing the roles of committee members as public officials.

JLA Public Involvement and PBOT staff conducted peer cities research, committee stakeholder interviews, reviewed exit interviews from members departing the committees and interviewed City staff to understand the current and past conditions (Appendix 1). From this research, JLA and PBOT staff developed a problem statement and a range of potential process and structure alternatives for consideration. All potential alternatives will be shared with modal committees for their contributions to evaluating the pros and cons of the alternatives. Additional review and evaluation will take place with support from transportation justice-focused organizations. The alternatives and their pros and cons will then be presented to the PBOT Director and Transportation Commissioner to determine what, if any, changes are necessary to better meet the needs of the City, community, and committee members. If the Transportation Commissioner propose changes, it will be a City Council decision, as the modal committees are City Council established advisory bodies.

### **Currently:**

*5 modal programs (bicycle, pedestrian, freight, transit, accessibility)*

*3 modal advisory committees (bicycle, freight, and pedestrian)*

### **Research completed for modal committee evaluation:**

- *Peer cities research (21) and interviews (8)*
- *In-meeting feedback from current modal committee members (3)*
- *Past modal committee member focus groups (3, with 13 participants)*
- *Review of exit interview results from departing modal committee members (9)*
- *City of Portland staff feedback (40) and interviews (6), including the modal committee coordinators*

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## PEER CITIES RESEARCH

To better understand the ways that peer cities from around North America engage with modal committees and complete street advocates, the PBOT Complete Streets team completed a preliminary screening of 21 cities around the United States and Canada to understand the potential range of committee structures (Appendix 2). The Complete Streets team then narrowed the list to eight cities. JLA started with interviewing six cities, and additional cities were recommended during the interviews (interview questions are in Appendix 2).

These cities provide a range of committee structures and geographic diversity - some cities are similar to Portland, while others are quite different. This range of cities allowed the team to create a big-picture view, before diving into specifics. The conversations and input from the interviews will help develop the problem statement and a range of alternatives. Below is a high-level summary of all findings grouped by topic.

The following table lists attributes for each peer city’s modal advisory bodies. An “X” is shown for each mode included and the “other topics” column highlights the committee’s focus or roles.

**Table 1: Peer Cities Findings**

City	Bike	Walk	Freight	Transit	Other Modes	Members	Policy	Plans & Projects	Modal Plan	Other Topics
Vancouver, BC Canada	X	X		X	Congestion management; all active transit	15 public, 5 non-voting staff from Council, Parks, Schools	X	X	X	
Denver, CO	X					25		X	X	
		X				18		X	X	
					Multi-Modal	11				Implement strategies/ actions of Mobility Action Plan.
					Transportation and Infrastructure	19	X	X		Review annual department budget
St. Louis, MI					Streets, Traffic and Refuse	8		X		All matters on streets, alleys, sidewalk, traffic and signage, parking, and refuse
			X	X	Transportation and Commerce	7				Airports, railroads, wharves, ports, bridges, inter-

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City	Bike	Walk	Freight	Transit	Other Modes	Members	Policy	Plans & Projects	Modal Plan	Other Topics
										city/state trucking, state and federal highways, public and mass transit
<b>Greensboro, NC</b>	X	X						X	X	
<b>Cambridge, MA</b>	X					20 plus staff	X	X		Commenting on pending bicycle-related ordinances; program development
		X				15	X	X		Focused on program development
				X		16 (1/3 residents; 1/3 institutions and stakeholder groups; 1/3 large and small businesses)	X	X		Focused on long term sustainable funding
<b>Houston, TX</b>	X					20 appointed by the mayor plus staff			X	Funding strategies; education and safety strategies
<b>San Francisco, CA</b>	X	X				8 district council appointed, 1 by mayor, 1 a trained engineer or planner; 1 transportation advocate		X	X	Grant funding opportunities program development in walking and bicycle safety, education, law enforcement Annually, report to and make recommendations to the mayor and council
<b>Oakland, CA</b>	X					9, appointed by the Mayor and approved by City Council	X	X		Must review applications for federal funding

## Membership and Committee Structure

- Most of the cities had a bike or bike/pedestrian committee. Vancouver was the only city to have a transportation committee and is focused mostly on transit, walking and biking. Cities with multiple committees had overlap and informal communication among them.
- Most had between 10-20 volunteer members. Most committees were formed by self-selected applicants or nominees that are then recommended by staff. Advisory groups members in Houston, Denver, Oakland, and San Francisco were directly appointed by an elected/appointed official.
- Many of the committees were formed as part of the modal plan development.
- Most cities had committee members that served for an average of 4 years, with about half of the committee members choosing to stay on for longer terms.
- No committee was demographically (racially or economically) reflective of the larger community. There were a few cities with structures that required geographic diversity.

*San Francisco: Separating the committee from the transportation agency has resulted in a lot of confusion, disconnect, and disenfranchisement.*

## Meeting Structure

- Agendas are set either by the chairs or staff. Field trips were common, as was the switch to virtual meetings during the pandemic. Most cities are currently switching between virtual and in-person, with a few offering hybrid meetings. Most mentioned that members liked the virtual format, and some that had returned to in person meetings have been asked to offer hybrid meetings.
- Most committees didn't follow a formal process but focused on dialogue building. Vancouver, BC and Oakland had formal meetings every other month that included the review/adoption of a formal message and vote using Robert's rules. Staff said that the formality of Robert's Rules is often at odds with the dialogue process.
- No city provided stipends for transportation or childcare support. Some offered food for members when meeting in-person. All committee members were unpaid volunteers.
- Most cities have one staff member assigned to each committee. While the roles and responsibilities varied, most were tasked with helping the committee develop meeting agendas, attending the meetings, and providing advice about the bureau and transportation issues, as well as serving as a primary contact to the city. Informally, many cities added that this staffer helps the committee advance their agenda.

*Denver: A stronger tie to the Mayor's office doesn't always result in committee members feeling appreciated and able to make change; that requires political interest.*

## Influence and Decision-Making

- The cities with newly formed committees (or during the early years of formation for cities with long-standing committees) said that the committee pushed staff to provide better design. Younger committees and transportation departments felt more engaged and able to make the biggest change.

## Modal Committee Evaluation Framework – Part 1

- For the longer established committees, many have evolved to provide policy direction, advocate for budget allocation, and push elected officials to prioritize issues such as Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and sustainability. Most cities with older structures had more turnover with members who felt less engaged.
- Staffers expressed a variety of experiences, but all the staff interviewed felt the committees were important. However, the staff felt that there was a common theme of uncertainty of the committee's role in decision-making, particularly when change is slow, and a committee has been in place for a long time. None of the committees were decision-makers, and that clarity and expectation setting was hard for some members. Most cities said that there was a disconnect between what the committee could provide and what staff could do; between opportunities and decision-making authority.
- No city had a metric for measuring the committee success.
- Most said that staff knew about and appreciated presenting to the committee. A few cities mentioned a need to change how, or educate staff on when, to come to the committee meetings and what type of input to solicit.
- For elected officials, the responses varied more by city. Vancouver, BC and Houston stated that elected officials were aware of and sought the input of the committee. Staff thought that the committees' effectiveness was tied directly to the interest of elected officials.

***Oakland:*** *The Commission also have a number of self-organized Committees: Infrastructure, Legislative, Bicyclist and Pedestrian Police Relations, Open Forum, and Planning Commission Review Committee. They also have two liaison positions: Liaison to Mayor's Commission on Persons with Disabilities, and Liaison to Affordable Housing & Infrastructure Bond Public Oversight Committee.*

## Community Input

- Most cities said that advocacy organizations were aware of and often served on the committees but most of the public was not aware of committees.
- In Cambridge, the committee is well respected and regularly leads bike rides, develops materials, and helps provide support that staff don't. Members feel engaged and represent the community voice; they are well respected by elected officials who will often accept information from the committee but not staff.

***Vancouver, BC:*** *A clerk oversees all City Commissions to help develop agendas and conduct formal votes. The modal liaison spends less time on managing the committees and provides more support for reviewing engineering designs, advocacy, and connecting with stakeholders. Letters, resolutions, and testimony (they get bumped to the front of the line) are critical to the connection to the City Council.*

## PORTLAND STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

Interviews with City of Portland staff, current modal committee members, committee alumni, and exit interviews provided insight on how committees are working today and what could be improved. Interviewees were asked a standard set of questions and were also given time to share their general thoughts and potential ideas for change. Some of the responses were collected verbally in group interviews and some were submitted through emails or exit interview forms. These answers will help inform development of the initial problem statement and ideas for changes to the committee structure.

Below is a high-level summary of all interview findings and opinions collected, with key themes in blue text followed by interview findings. More information can be found in Appendix 3.

*Note: While the text below is a summary of interview responses, it represents individual opinions and may not be factually accurate regarding City of Portland approved processes and procedures or may be addressing issues that have been resolved in recent years.*

### Membership and Committee Structure

#### Successful Community Building and Plan Development

- The committees are helpful when they can bring community and industry together for cross-understanding and shared ideas and recommendations. They can help shape policy, strategies, and investment options.
  - Exit interviews, along with past and current members said that they appreciated the commitment, passion and knowledge shown by fellow committee members.
- Committee members indicated that they felt the most successful and influential when they were creating or implementing a modal plan. Having a clear charge allows the groups to have goals to work toward and a sense of accomplishment, but that is currently lacking for the bicycle and pedestrian committees.
  - Some alumni and exit interviews indicated that some members never felt the committees were influential or that they didn't feel the committee had responsibilities beyond showing up.

#### Barriers to Participation

- Some members of the bicycle and pedestrian committees expressed perceptions that most of the bicycle and pedestrian committees are uncompensated volunteers while several freight committee members are paid by the organizations or businesses that they represent, not only for their meeting time but also time spent reviewing documents outside of meetings. In the past, some members of the bicycle and pedestrian committees were paid through their organizations, but that has changed over time as membership has changed and organizational members are not currently serving.
- The City of Portland's standardization for committee structures in 2017 (Appendix 4) was mentioned many times by members as being necessary but poorly implemented.

## Modal Committee Evaluation Framework – Part 1

- The freight committee was provided with more time to accommodate the term limits policy, which was seen as unfair by the other committees and modal liaisons. The freight committee has not yet implemented the term limits policy and doing so would entail nearly a full replacement/ recruitment.
- It changed who could serve on the committees and some interviewees suggested that the new structure has disadvantaged the bicycle and pedestrian committees by limiting the amount of technical knowledge or political capital carried by the members.
- Institutional and technical knowledge was highlighted by all committee members and Portland staff as one of the highest values that the committees provided. Without that knowledge or onboarding procedures for new members, there was a steep learning curve which resulted in fewer beneficial comments during that timeframe.
- No committee is perceived to be demographically (racially, geographically, or economically) representative.
  - Almost all interviewees indicated a desire to increase the racial, geographic, and economic diversity of committee members.
  - The 2017 membership changes were cited as a limiting factor for demographic considerations during member recruitment.
  - Barriers to membership included meeting times and location as well a general lack of community knowledge of what the committees do and why someone would want to become a member.
  - Some members mentioned that it is hard to shift perspective by mode, and that geography may be a better way to organize the committees.
  - The “In Motion” projects were listed as a successful way to gather information and representation by geography (instead of by mode).

***Feeling unfair:*** *There is a real or perceived power difference and lack of fairness between the modal committees regarding political influence, participation of paid professionals, influence in decision making, etc.*

## Communication and Collaboration

- Communication among modal committees is not formalized and often lacking, even when there are overlapping interests or goals.
  - One annual joint meeting between bicycle and pedestrian committees was mentioned; that meeting was seen as successful even if large and harder to manage.
  - Bicycle committee alumni said they tried to communicate with and attend meetings with the freight committee, but they were not welcomed.
  - Freight committee members said they tried to arrange meetings with members of the bicycle and pedestrian committees but were not successful in achieving cross-committee collaboration.
  - Staff mentioned freight members being dismissive of all other modes and they were concerned about combining the committees for that reason.

***Broken lines of communication limits creative problem solving:*** *The lack of communication between modal committees limits their ability to understand one another and the competing demands faced by the City of Portland.*



## Modal Committee Evaluation Framework – Part 1

- The increased nationwide and PBOT focus on Complete Streets and Safe Systems to meet cross-modal stakeholder collaboration are not reflected in the current modal structure.
  - Staff need definition for what it means to do “complete streets,” as well as how to handle modal conflicts, overlaps, priorities and tradeoffs
  - An integrated modal committee was suggested by some staff and modal committee members as a way to understand tradeoffs and ask harder questions to help create a holistic street approach.
  - It would be valuable to have joint problem-solving exercises, especially around new/cutting edge issues.

## Perception of Fairness

- The issue of fairness between the committees was mentioned by staff and committee members (past and current).
  - The bicycle and pedestrian committees felt that freight was not a mode similar to theirs; they didn’t feel like it was comparable because freight moves via a wide variety of modes. The freight committee agreed.
  - The Pedestrian Committee would like to be part of PBOT funding allocation to active transportation, the way the Bicycle Committee does or is perceived to do.
  - There needs to be consistency between how the three committees are supported, treated, given influence and resourced. For example, the Commissioner can’t attend only one consistently; they all need the same public notices of meetings, ways to sign up, materials accessible online, etc.

## Meeting Structure

*Great Portlanders Serving Their City: Everyone interviewed said how impressed they were with the knowledge, commitment, and passion of the committee members.*

## City Staffing

- One staff person (modal liaison) is assigned to each committee, though the roles and responsibilities varied. Most liaisons developed/helped to develop the meeting agenda, attend the meetings, and provide advice about the bureau and transportation issues, as well as serve as a primary contact to the City.
  - Committee members expressed that the liaison was a useful contact to the City, though it was unclear how influential they were within the bureau. Exit interviews showed that members leaving were impressed by the staff support.
  - Portland staff added that liaisons can be adversarial with their desire to advance the committee’s agenda. This adversarial relationship between the staff negatively impacted the view of the committee for staff and made them fearful to attend committee meetings.
- The operation of the committees is expensive.
  - It requires senior level staff time, support staff, presenting staff, and more which results in a large financial impact. In addition, there is a lot of management of people and the committee members’ emotions according to some staff.

## Meeting Format and Preparation

- The meeting agendas are set either by the chairs or staff.
  - Field trips were common for the bicycle and pedestrian committees.
  - The City of Portland provided food for all three committees when meetings were held in-person.
- The meetings were typically the same between modes with presentations followed by dialogue, but there were some issues raised about the structure.
  - An informal process focused on dialogue building is used but few decisions are made, or votes taken.
  - All committees switched to virtual format during the pandemic. While some members appreciated the ease of participation, others missed the personal connections and opportunities to form relationships that are present during in-person meetings.
  - Staff suggested the need for stronger facilitation of the meetings, which can get heated, with liaisons often in the middle. Many staff have felt attacked by committee members in the meetings and that members do not understand the tradeoffs required by planning and construction projects.
  - Exit interviews and interviews with past members indicated little time for conversation or response to issues. Instead, many said they felt like the committees provided an opportunity to have staff brief the committee without shaping the outcome of a process or project. Several mentioned that this has changed over time from previously engaging with and soliciting input to only information presented to the committees.

## Influence and Decision-Making

### Feelings of Influence

- There is no metric for measuring success. Staff and members said that there is a disconnect between what the committee could provide (knowledge or feedback) and what staff could do (or influence). This lack of clarity around the committee roles was mentioned by liaisons and members; this was a major issue for those completing exit interviews.
  - Exit interviews indicated that the committee creates accountability by existing but doesn't move the needle on specific projects.
- Advocacy organizations are aware of and often serve on the committee(s) but most of the general public are not aware of the committees. There were noted power imbalances between the committees with large stakeholder/advocacy groups currently represented (such as on the freight committee), compared to committees without that same power or political clout (bicycle or pedestrian committees).
- Current and past members, as well as staff said that the current City of Portland government structure results in the committee's success being tied directly to the personal interest of the elected official assigned to PBOT.
  - Without explicit connection to people in power or a clear, continuous feedback loop from elected/appointed officials, committee members saw themselves as powerless and ineffective.

*No measure for success: It is unclear what the charge and responsibility for each modal committee entails.*

## Modal Committee Evaluation Framework – Part 1

- Even when elected officials were interested in transportation, members still felt they needed to advocate for more change than the City was willing to make.

### Outcomes

- During the early years of formation, committee members felt it beneficial to push staff to provide better design and create the biggest changes within the City. As the committees have continued, there has been a lack of direction and influence over decisions; members don't feel well utilized or appreciated. There is a lack of engagement and influence, which has resulted in members feeling alienated from the committee structure, PBOT, and the City of Portland.
  - Staff noted that during earlier years, the committees brought expertise that staff lacked, but now many creative designs are coming from staff.
  - Some past committee members felt that the City does not go far enough in their designs.

### Staff Expectations

- Staff are unclear what information to present to committees, when to attend meetings, or what to ask the members.
  - Committee members felt that presenters and PBOT were merely “checking the box” when they presented because there was not enough time to review materials in advance to provide thoughtful and useful comments, the project/topic was brought to the committee too late to influence the decision or design, and/or there was not enough time to discuss and ask questions during the presentation.
  - There was also a lack of clarity on how to engage the committee when a project has its own committee and public involvement process.
  - Providing clarity and setting expectations for the level of influence was called out as a challenge by PBOT staff, alumni, and current members.
  - The modal committees' bylaws say they are advisory to all bureaus; however, most of the presentations are from PBOT or ODOT. Portland Parks or BES could also have issues that could be relevant committees.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

Through this process, two themes emerged:

1. What it means to have meaningful engagement through structure or process improvements.
  - a. Clarity of what issues go to committees, when in the process, and how the feedback will be used or considered.
  - b. Includes means for bringing different modes together for more complex considerations and cross-mode understanding.
  - c. Procedures for city staff to follow up with committees about how their feedback was considered and/or impacted changes.
  - d. Elected official’s equal periodic committee attendance.
2. What it means to include a full range of perspectives so there’s increased diversity of committee members as well as meaningful inclusion.
  - a. Increased diversity of committee members (modes and accessibility; experience or expertise; geography; demographic).
  - b. Meaningful inclusion in events that celebrate PBOT wins, in participation, and retainment within term limits.

## Issues

The following table captures the comments collected during the interviews. Each row shows a different problem, with the range of viewpoints called out in the columns either from the committee members or staff, with shared problems in the middle. Objectives that resulted from the common problem are shown in the last column.

**Table 2: Problem, Comments, and Objectives**

	<b>Problem</b>	<b>Committee member Comments</b>	<b>Shared Comments</b>	<b>City Staff Comments</b>	<b>Objectives</b>
1	<b>Unclear charge and expectations of engagement</b>	The presenters provide information without enough time to review and provide useful comments; meant to “check the box” for public engagement; the presentations are made at the wrong time; “the ask” is unclear. The influence of the feedback is unknown at the ask, which results in inflexible	<i>It is unclear what the charge and responsibility for each modal committee is when it comes to what, when, and how to provide best feedback.</i>	There are internal pressures to visit the committees which instills fear of retaliation and adversarial relationships instead of collaboration. Uncertainty of what to ask the committees results in fear of presenting, coming to the committee at the wrong time,	Develop a framework to clarify what projects/ issues go to modal committees (vs other types of engagement), when in the process, how to ask feedback, and how the feedback will be used or considered.

		viewpoints, feelings of powerlessness, and greater distrust of government.		and unhelpful/inconsistent comments on the projects presented.	
2	<b>Lack of communication limits problem solving</b>	Some individual modal committee members have made attempts in the past to bridge differences and build understanding together with other modal committees, however structural or procedural change is needed to foster more ongoing connection.	<i>The lack of communication between modal committees limits their ability to understand one another and the competing demands faced by the City of Portland.</i>	Staff often need to grapple with tradeoffs between modes, space allocation, and policies. Feedback that considers tradeoffs is more helpful, however committees aren't designed to do this because of their siloes.	Create means of bringing different modes together for more complex considerations and cross-mode understanding.
	<b>Problem</b>	<b>Committee member Comments</b>	<b>Shared Comments</b>	<b>City Staff Comments</b>	<b>Objectives</b>
3	<b>Unknown impact and limited connection to elected officials that the committees serve.</b>	There is no feedback loop with the committees and the staff and/or elected officials they provide advice to. Letters are not responded to or acknowledged.	<i>Committee members and staff want the feedback from the committees to be worthwhile but is no consistent practice of showing whether or how it was.</i>	Committee members share feedback in meetings that sometimes conflicts with one another and often conflicts with feedback given by other modal committees.	Establish procedures for staff to follow up with committees about how their feedback was considered and/ or impacted changes, provide responses to letters submitted, and establish traditions for PBOT leadership and elected officials' equal periodic committee attendance.
4	<b>Committees are not representative and have perceptions of inconsistent influence among committees</b>	There is a perceived power difference and lack of fairness between the committees regarding their political influence, participation of paid professionals, and impact on decision making. Committees are not consistently included meaningfully in PBOT celebrations of wins.	<i>Need to increase the racial, geographic, and demographic diversity of committee members. As well as a mix of technical experts and politically influential organizations/ influencers.</i>	From an equity standpoint, because the committees are not as representative as other engagement that takes place on specific projects, it is hard to justify weighing some of the feedback from the committees any higher than other feedback.	Increase the diversity of committee members and include them meaningfully in all big events that celebrate PBOT wins.

## **Problem Statement**

Below is a draft problem statement that addresses the range of issues listed above. This question will be asked of all the alternatives, to ensure that the main goals are being addressed.

*How might we create modal engagement that is meaningful to the participants as well as to the City and PBOT staff, while representing a full range of perspectives?*