



Advisory Bodies Analysis & Recommendations



Issue

Are council appointed advisory bodies still meeting their original purpose? Is the City Council receiving meaningful input from these chosen community representatives? Do advisory bodies reflect equitable and inclusive representation? Are the advisory body members having an impactful experience? Are advisory bodies a sustainable and effective use of resources?

Recommendations

Adopt a multi-prong community engagement toolkit (i.e., community collaborators, connectors, and academies) and reconfigure eligible advisory bodies into multidisciplinary advisory bodies based on the City's six Comprehensive Plan focus areas. These recommendations would be accompanied by new operational changes – including shifts in recruitment and work plan timelines, standardized orientations, and advisory body criteria tests and audits – to improve accessibility, responsiveness, and resource efficiency. Used together, these tools can create a more holistic approach to community issues and solutions.

Background and Analysis

CLPS asks whether council appointed advisory bodies are still fulfilling their original purpose

At their May 2025 meeting, the Community and Livability Public Safety (CLPS) Committee discussed the role of council appointed advisory bodies. Up until this point, a comprehensive evaluation of the City's 14 advisory bodies had not been performed.

Their initial questions focused on the following:

- Can we improve the relationship between City Council and advisory bodies? There seemed to be a disconnect between City Council's priorities and initiatives and advisory body work plans.
- Can we change the recruitment process? The current single recruitment period was time intensive, not equitable in format, and not responsive to mid-year vacancies.
- Can we re-evaluate the structure and management of advisory bodies themselves, including meeting frequency, onboarding, etc.? Inconsistencies across the advisory bodies have led to some confusion about scope and expectations among both staff liaisons and community members.
- Would it be possible to consolidate some advisory bodies? Some advisory bodies had overlapping or wide scopes, while some have not had any recent referrals from Council.

Executive staff presented to CLPS data gathered from staff liaisons and advisory body members, including exit surveys from former members:

- Several advisory bodies consistently canceled meetings or were frequently not meeting quorum (e.g., Heritage Commission canceled half of their meetings in 2023 and 2024; Design Review Committee canceled 70% of their meetings in 2024; and Social Justice and Equity Commission had 4 people absent at 50% of their meetings).
- There was high turnover in membership among some bodies (e.g., Heritage Commission, Social Justice and Equity Commission, and Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee).
- There was recurring difficulty in finding viable candidates to fill vacancies;
- Only 4 out of 58 items on 2024 advisory body work plans were Council referrals; the other 54 items were either staff initiated or advisory body member requests (e.g., informational briefings about city programs and services).
- Lastly, while the appointed members found their board or commission terms meaningful to them (78%), many were unsure whether their advisory body was impactful on policy making or a good use of staff time and resources.

Together, CLPS and executive staff affirmed these community engagement goals:

- Meaningful input to guide policy and decision-making;
- Equitable and inclusive engagement;
- Impactful participation and experiences for members; and
- Sustainable use of resources (staff and funding).

With these goals in mind, CLPS directed staff to move forward with a recommendation to have advisory bodies meet only as needed based on their work plans. They also directed staff to research the resource impact to staff liaisons for other possible council advisory options.

CLPS meets with advisory body chairs and liaisons to hear their perspectives

At their June 2025 meeting, CLPS met with the chairs, vice chairs, and staff liaisons of the advisory bodies. The group discussed what they felt was working well, and where they believed improvement was needed. Overall there was appreciation for the dedication of the staff liaisons and the general educational experiences of serving on these advisory bodies. However, below were also shared concerns and questions:

- Desire a better understanding of how government works;
- Need more clarity of expectations, purpose, and scope;
- Need a more defined relationship with Council, Council's priorities, and how their work is related to Council's work plans;
- Standardize feedback loop after recommendations are sent to Council;
- More options to hear diverse voices;
- Consider joint meetings with multiple advisory bodies for major topics/recommendations to Council.
- Ways to recruit and engage the next generation and future constituents;
- Ways to recruit and engage impacted communities.

City retains consultant to continue advisory body review

With Director of Communications Kellie Purce Braseth retiring in June 2025, the City contracted with myself (Genevieve Canceko Chan) to continue the review process and to provide recommendations on the following:

- 1) how advisory bodies can be organized, scoped, managed, and staffed so they can work more efficiently and effectively; and
- 2) how the recruitment process can be updated to maximize board/committee/commission members' time, expertise, and interests, and better support priorities of the City Council's workplan.

I was drawn to the project given my background in strategic communications, board management, and community relations, as well as my experience serving on the first cohort for the Social Justice and Equity Commission and more recently on the Cultural Access Advisory Board.

At the September 2025 CLPS meeting, I shared that my scope of work would include reviewing and synthesizing past notes, presentations, and surveys collected by City staff and advisory members; interviewing advisory body liaisons and chairs; and researching and contacting other municipalities about their experiences with advisory bodies and community engagement efforts. I also shared that I planned to talk with CLPS chair and Mayor Pro Tem Yén Huỳnh and Assistant City Manager Debbie Sullivan during the research process.

Confirmed and new insights from advisory body interviews

Between September 2025 and January 2026, I interviewed 12 staff liaisons and 5 advisory body members. While all valued the importance of, and the opportunity for, community input on policies and projects, all concurred with what was previously mentioned: inconsistent onboarding, unclear scope or expectations, redundant work across advisory bodies, and the feeling that their work was far removed or not visible to Council or the general community.

Some new ideas that were expressed were:

- A shared orientation for both staff liaisons and new members, so that key expectations and training was standardized across all the advisory bodies, and to build a sense of cohort among all incoming advisory board members.
- More mid-year contact built-in with the City Council to better understand priorities and share progress on work plan items.
- Opportunities to work directly with other advisory bodies on shared issues or projects.
- Ways for advisory board members to engage directly with general community members or impacted communities on issues they are tasked with.
- A way to assess whether a new advisory body is needed and/or if an existing advisory body is no longer needed.

Insights from other municipalities on use of advisory bodies and community engagement tools

During this same time, between September 2025 and January 2026, I interviewed comparable mid- to large-sized municipalities: Lacey, WA; Portland, OR; Boulder, CO; Ann Arbor, MI; and Asheville, NC. Many were undergoing (or recently underwent) similar reviews of their use of advisory bodies and community engagement strategies overall, mostly prompted by budget issues, equity initiatives, and/or recent community disillusionment/distrust with city government.

Boulder established an entirely new Engagement Strategic Framework in 2016 to rebuild trust with its constituents. Ann Arbor also similarly restructured to better align communications with community engagement efforts and improve transparency. Asheville was undergoing a major pause and re-evaluation of its advisory bodies: the city was devastated by Hurricane Helene in 2024 and needed to centralize city government initiatives and programs under the four recovery priorities (People and Environment, Housing, Infrastructure, and Economy). In 2022, Portland changed to a mayor-council form of government, which necessitated a review and streamlining of their advisory bodies and they launched the Advisory Bodies Enhancement Project in fall 2025.

Many cities echoed concerns related to the lack of clarity around purpose and scope of advisory bodies; underrepresentation of impacted communities; redundancies in work and process; and advisory board members feeling removed from City Council and/or policy decisions.

The cities shared some new and innovative ideas:

- Co-locate communications and community engagement teams for better coordination on outreach efforts.
- Adopt criteria tests and audit tests for standing advisory bodies.
- Create or organize multidisciplinary advisory bodies around key values or strategic objectives.
- Stand up web-based dashboard for city programs, initiatives, and issues to share info and show how community members can get involved.
- Expand options for community education, involvement, and input (e.g., community academies, community connectors)

Below is an at-a-glance summary of the different ways the cities approached community engagement:

	Lacey, WA	Portland, OR	Boulder, CO	Ann Arbor, MI	Asheville , NC
Communications with Community Engagement	X		X	X	
City-wide interdepartmental engagement committees			X	X	
Criteria Tests and Audit Tests for advisory bodies		X			X
Community Academies for general education or open forums	X		X	X	
Community Connectors or Ambassadors for different constituent groups		X	X	X	
Community Collaborators or subject matter experts for ad hoc working groups or task forces		X	X		
Multidisciplinary advisory bodies		X			X
Rolling recruitment for advisory bodies	X	X	X		
Web dashboard of projects, initiatives, and community engagement opportunities for transparency and accessibility			X	X	

Recommendations for the City of Olympia

- Based on the research outlined above, I am proposing two categories for recommendations:
- Operational improvements to current advisory body system
- Reimagining community engagement

Operational improvements to current advisory body system

- **Recruitment timing** - Shift recruitment timeline so new members start at the beginning of the new calendar year and can participate in work plan planning

- **Onboarding** - Standardize onboarding and orientation across advisory bodies
- **Work plan alignment** - Align advisory body work plans with Council work plan
- **Criteria test** - Establish a criteria test for creation of new advisory body
- **Audit** - Implement a regular audit of the existing advisory bodies to discern whether they should continue, be converted into another community engagement tool, or sunsetted

Reimagining community engagement

Under this category, there are new engagement options to fit each unique project or program. Together, these options are an engagement toolkit that hopefully better values volunteers' and staff's time, expertise, and interests. The new tools are:

- **Community Academies** - Help educate community members on how local government works. Not a community forum in that this is not a space for debate or grievances to the City, but an opportunity for the City to cover common questions about departments, projects, services, or opportunities to get involved.
- **Community Connectors** (e.g., trusted community liaisons or leaders) - Individuals with connections to specific constituent groups in the community.
 - Helps host conversations with the specific groups around City initiatives.
 - Helps disseminate information.
 - Builds trust and relationships for more authentic engagement.
- **Community Collaborators** (e.g., subject matter experts) - Individuals with special interest or expertise who can be tapped to serve on ad hoc working groups or focus groups.
 - Diversifies voices and perspectives on issues.
 - With a defined length of time for projects, there's a shorter time commitment than traditional advisory bodies.
 - Opportunity to keep past advisory body members connected to the work and not lose their experience/expertise when no longer on a board
- **Multidisciplinary Advisory Bodies** - Re-organize eligible advisory bodies to align with Comprehensive Plan Focus Areas
 - Encourages multidisciplinary problem solving.
 - Responsive to feedback from 2025 Advisory Body Chairs meeting about collaboration across sectors.
 - Better reflection of how the community experiences government.
 - Aligns with the way we talk about and approach the work throughout the City.

The above recommendations in an initial draft were shared with CLPS at their February 25, 2026 meeting.

Testing and vetting recommendations

In addition to CLPS, Stacey Ray, Margo Morales, and I met with and shared the proposed recommendations with the following stakeholder groups and asked for their feedback.

- Staff liaisons (2 meetings in January and March)
- Social Justice and Equity Commission (SJEC) (April 20, 2026 and May 18, 2026)
- Advisory body chairs (May 7, 2026)

To reach a broader stakeholder audience, a survey was sent to all current advisory body members and staff liaisons to assess their personal experience with advisory bodies and to ask them to review the suggested new tools for community engagement, including community academies, collaborators, connectors and multidisciplinary advisory bodies. - **See Survey Results**

Overall, response has been positive to the recommendations, seeing opportunities to improve accessibility and diversity in representation of community voices; intersectional understanding of issues and approach to solutions; and more efficient, impactful deployment of staff resources. There continue to be questions around implementation, distinctions in application between community engagement tools, and concerns around a potential loss of depth of expertise if there are fewer advisory bodies and/or fewer advisory body seats.

- **See Advisory Body Chairs Meeting Notes**

- **See Letter from SJEC**

The stakeholder comments and survey results have been collected in attached documents and will inform the next iteration of these recommendations, along with any further direction, requests, or comments from CLPS.

Attachments:

Timeline (see below)

Advisory Body Members Survey Results

Letter from SJEC

Advisory Body Chairs Meetings Notes

Timeline

Advisory Bodies Analysis and Recommendations

May 2025: On May 28, Assistant City Manager Debbie Sullivan presented data on the effectiveness of council appointed advisory bodies to the Community and Livability Public Safety Committee (CLPS).

June 2025: On June 25, 2025, CLPS held its annual meeting with the advisory body chairs and staff liaisons.

September 2025: With the retirement of Communications Director Kellie Purse Braseth, the city contracted me to continue this work.

September 2025 - January 2026: Interviewed staff liaisons, advisory body members, and other municipalities. Shared a preliminary draft of the recommendations with Debbie Sullivan, Stacey Ray, and Margo Morales.

Municipalities contacted included:

- Lacey, WA: Shannon Kelley-Fong, Assistant City Manager and Jenny Bauersfeld, Communications Specialist
- Portland, OR: Ocean Jasso, Advisory Bodies Program, Office of Community and Civic Resources Commission Historic
- Boulder, CO: Ryan Hanschen, Engagement Specialist
- Ann Arbor, MI: Jasmine Isaac-Ofuri, Community Engagement Specialist and Robert Kellar, Communications Specialist
- Asheville, NC: Alex Smith, Assistant City Clerk

January 2026: Margo Morales, Stacey Ray, and I met with a subset of advisory body staff liaisons to review a preliminary draft of the recommendations.

February 2026: Stacey Ray and I presented initial recommendations to CLPS, including operational improvements; criteria tests for standing a new advisory body and audits to assess whether existing advisory bodies should continue; suggestions for diversifying community engagement tools, including multidisciplinary advisory bodies.

March 2026: Margo Morales, Stacey Ray, and I met again with staff liaisons to review the initial recommendations.

April 2026: City sent out a survey to all current advisory body members and staff liaisons to assess their personal experience with advisory bodies and to ask them to review the suggested new tools for community engagement, including community academies, collaborators, connectors and multidisciplinary advisory bodies. In addition, Margo Morales, Stacey Ray, and I met with the Social Justice and Equity Commission to apply an equity analysis on the suggested new community engagement tools.

May 2026: Met with the chairs and staff liaisons of advisory bodies in a working session to discuss the suggested new community engagement tools as well as proposed operational improvements. Shared results of the advisory body member surveys. Debriefed with advisory bodies liaisons to collect key takeaways and reactions from the working session. Margo Morales, Stacey Ray, and I once again met with the Social Justice and Equity Commission to update them on the chairs' meeting and to support further discussions before they drafted their response letter to CLPS.