

August 17, 2021: Olympia City Council Work Session (Online)

Facilitator: Kerensa Mabwa, Athena Group

Meeting Goals:

Host discussion of topics from the General Government Committee. Lead Councilmembers in a discussion on new Working Agreements that enhance productive interaction and collaboration.

Meeting Agenda

Introductions: Kerensa invited the Councilmembers to introduce themselves, share their pronouns and how they were arriving to the meeting.

Council Business

Kerensa introduced the following topics from the General Government for discussion.

1) Council Referral Process

Description: The proposed referral process prompts Councilmembers interested in working on an issue to fill out the new referral form and send it to Susan Grisham, Assistant to the City Manager. Members will turn referrals in to Susan by Wednesday at noon, the week before the next Council meeting. Referrals will be included in Council packets and published before the Tuesday Council Meeting. Referrals will be listed under the Council meeting agenda in the reports and referral section. With majority approval, the Council will move a referral forward to a committee or determine if it needs more consideration. The referral form has been updated with new options for where to send a request, such as a staff, an advisory committee etc.

Kerensa clarified the types of referrals; both non-urgent and urgent (those needing to get into a committee) and the proposed referral process. Councilmembers will determine whether it's urgent or less urgent and if requesters need to offer more information. Susan shared the new referral form for viewing during the discussion.

Council Feedback: Councilmembers agreed to move forward with this new process with the following additions to the referral form:

- replace 'City Council' with 'Work Session'
- Remove majority consensus to aid in timely topic processing
- Replace 'consider' rather than 'discuss'
- Add 'equity' and 'climate' to the form so the Councilmembers to address how the topic furthers the city's goals pertaining to those categories; integrate the two categories into staff reports for city business
- Add a section to name supporting documentation and how topic is related to the comprehensive plan

Description: The process recommended is to schedule work session dates and agendas at the Council's annual retreat, where Councilmembers can brainstorm ideas for work sessions and calendar. The intention of the process is to plan for the year, balance work schedules, vacations and gaps with the Councilmembers' need to have dedicated time to move policy forward. Advance planning would enable consent items to be on the calendar for public comment and allow unscheduled open time for emergent topics. Work Sessions agenda items will be determined by referral, by staff recommending a regulatory, timeline driven item (i.e., grants, city plan) or because staff hear about a topic often from Councilmembers. Either staff or Councilmembers will contact the Mayor or the Mayor Pro-Tem to get an item on the agenda before a meeting.

Kerensa explained the three types of meetings that the Council has recently added to its governance structures.

- **Standard business meetings** – A meeting for the Council to act on things, such as take votes and move items forward. The meeting is scheduled twice per month and is ideal for shorter (15-20 min) discussions, so topics don't build up waiting to be discussed at the retreat.
- **Study Session** – A meeting that typically has presentations from staff for Council briefing, for substantial or highly technical topics, or those with a high level of community interest. Staff will prepare ahead of time, then present information to Councilmembers to learn about the topics. These occur once per month for the first hour before a business meeting and Council utilizes the more formal dais for seating.
- **Work session** – A meeting to give the Council time for a free flow of conversation about a topic. Members talk amongst themselves, with staff present but not participating. Sessions are typically two hours in length to allow time to cover 1-2 topics. Meetings take place around a table rather than the dais.

Council Feedback: Members had a clarifying discussion with staff about which items go to a Work Session and how to differentiate between meeting types. The Council disagreed slightly on the exact process of using the Work and Study Sessions. The following points were made:

- Keep Work Sessions and Study Session separate structurally and understand that an iterative process is in play
- Keep the structure flexible; form a hybrid of the Work and Study Sessions so that Councilmembers can get needed information front loaded to them before conversing about it.
- Maintain two business meetings per month to avoid stacking items on one agenda

3) Advisory Commissions

Description: General Government assigns each of the members to a committee and informs the staff liaison and committee chair. The Council liaison attends a meeting early on the committee meeting calendar to listen, especially when new people join a committee or commission. As a courtesy to the chair, the liaison will let them know ahead of time that they will be joining the meeting. The liaison is not expected to attend all meetings, only occasionally for a check-in, early in the committee cycle. Kerensa hosted a discussion with the Councilmembers to make sure the committee liaison process is still working; make clear what the role of a liaison is, as well as the time and expectation requirements.

Council Feedback: The following points were discussed by the Council:

- The General Government Committee (GC) will still have the advisory committee chairs report once per year to the GC liaison, on their committee workplan
- This is a better use of the advisory committees, which will enable the Council to listen, and the committees will feel more heard
- Transparency: Assigned Council sub-Committee contacts will be known by GC liaisons. This will streamline the process of committee workplan submission and review by full Council

Facilitated Conversation on Working Agreements

Description: Kerensa led the Councilmembers in a facilitated conversation to build their Working Agreements. These are shared expectations that the Council co-creates around how they will work together, enhance their collaboration, and group and individual accountability. Working agreements will help the Council to pay attention to both the way they work together and how they meet their goals as a team. By consistently bringing the agreements into their work over time, the Council can increase their success together as a governing body.

Kerensa opened the discussion of working agreements with a reminder of norms to help set a safer and supportive framework for the discussion. All members agreed to uphold them for the duration of the session.

Norms:

- Share honestly about your own experience (I statements)
- Assume positive intent
- Support courageous conversation
- Help co-facilitate our experience today
- Share the mic (move up, move back)
- Think big (what will make us be even better together?)
- Ask for what YOU need
- Be mindful of intent vs impact
- Compassion

Kerensa offered the following prompts and Councilmembers stated their perspectives:

1) Think ahead to the end of this meeting. How do you feel when we have completed our discussion?

- A sense of relief and cohesion with a big intention that we can work together as a team
- Satisfied, relief, rewarding, jazzed to get going with this group
- Kickstarts; moving past the struggles, sadness and frustration of working online; a reset for the onscreen vibe
- Honored and humbled to struggle together with all of you
- Feeling it already that they are exercising an artifact or recipe they've already created; we can be hard on ourselves, and this is already bringing each other along and codifying it

- Our output is incredible for a city of our size, being well beyond what it used to be
- Nice! Resources to look back to for those moments when we are not in agreement or not seeing eye to eye
- Apprehension: good to be golden but what if we don't follow them when things are stressful?
- I hope we do follow them

2) What do you personally bring to your role on the Council and why are you serving on it? Or what values do you want the Council to embody?

- Mayor's role is to get voices to be heard and put own thoughts last. Not always as good as I can be to recap folks while functioning as the moderate. It's like being steady wheels on the road and can be irritating. Focus on the long-term and being a forward thinker
- Bring a different lived experience in Olympia, a city which we all love and care about; bring all the people who can relate to the work we do with differing experience. It's not special but difficult. Also bring the Council and the community together and to do good work for a little bit of time
- Hard work, persistence, sometime irritating and moves things forward. Connect people over issues in the community and help bring Council to whom they should be talking to. In conflict, see how to figure things out and how to move forward
- Sharing, centering and advocacy for working people who are valuable and deserving just as much attention. Make mistakes and learn to listen across the little things across my life, be a booster cheerleader. Always asking for more beyond what we are doing
- Fair pay to the community for all workers; striving to be accessible and not set own agenda; create pathways for folks not at the table. If we get to break structures apart and reform, it's the cool part. Take seriously that I can help my colleagues succeed in getting things done.
- Values: service to community, region; the belief that even as Olympia is 1 in 4 of Thurston County, we can be a partner to help them be better just as they can do with us. Look at the whole picture before we move forward. Bring a personal aspect to all data, be a catalyst in thought, asking 'why?'. Optimism, bursting envelopes instead of repeating tradition. Honesty about and learning from our own mistakes; see the Council as my teammates

Kerensa guided the Councilmembers to consider these questions to catalyze ideas for the draft Working agreements:

- How do you show up for each other and build trust?
- What do you need from the group to show up and still get work done?
- How do you need each other to show up when things are challenging such as conflict/disagreement, divisive topics (public safety, human rights, housing for the unhoused etc.), tense community issues or uncertainty (pandemic impacts)?

Draft Working Agreements:

- It's ok to disagree (respectfully)
 - Assume positive intent, and think critically
 - Respect feelings and concerns of each other

- Split (vote) decisions are ok (avoid pressure to be unanimous)
 - Interrupt with differing perspectives (helps us to understand how we voted differently)
 - Share the 'Why' and it's ok to 'be different'
- We are a team
 - Encourage and find ways to be mutually successful
- Find common ground
 - We are here because we love this place (Olympia)
- Honesty
 - Different styles: forthright, direct or coded
- Curiosity & Embrace Difference
 - New ideas are possible
 - Remain open to where we are all coming from, stand up for where community is going
 - Ask questions first
 - See difference as an opportunity to learn (*there is more than one type of community in Olympia*)
- Healthy communication
 - Be available for communication balanced with busy life (give grace)
 - Be transparent
 - Alert each other when plans change
 - Avoid sudden changes of mind after collaboration (no surprises)
 - Keep it legal (OPMI)
- Ask for what you need
 - In conflict – mutual reaching out to converse when ready
 - Be proactive (ask staff)
- Build trust and acknowledge each other's work as valuable
 - Make space and time to process ideas (introverts/extroverts)
- Relationship Building
 - Ok to be feisty (passion)
 - Balance fun and professional
 - Take time to get to know each other
- Equity

1) Among Ourselves:

- Look at the origin of the issue, know when to act and move fast/slowly (easy decisions to make)
- No experts (ok not to know, and to find out, ok to do things in a way we never have)
- Consider safety to assist expression of opinion (not sharing if taking things personally)

2) Equity in the Community:

- Allow differing perspectives in leadership, access to leadership (committees, interjurisdictional, sharing leadership opportunities)
- Prioritize talking with other groups, spend time with a diversity of people, everyone at the table
- Slow down rather than increased sense of urgency; meets community where they are at
- Consider systemic transformations rather than band aid policy of helping people

3) Prioritize Inclusion

- Be intentional when inviting people to work on projects together
- Reach out to different people to get involved from the community (not the same voice every time)

Closing: The Work Session ended with Kerensa asking each member to share a highlight or takeaway from the session.

Next Steps and Comments

Here are a few ideas and comments for the Council to consider as they finalize their draft Working Agreements in subsequent Work Sessions.

Revision of Agreements

- I encourage the Councilmembers to view their agreements as a living document of norms that inform the Council's culture. When new Councilmembers begin a term, all members could review it and the Council incorporate new guidelines.
- Councilmembers can identify which guidelines will be the basis for the agreement as non-negotiable expectations. In this way, Council can avoid repeated changes unless they decide a fresh foundation is necessary or if there is a major transition in membership.
- I also encourage the members to determine how often and when the Council revisits the agreements in their yearly calendar.

Equity

- The Council might add a shared definition of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) to the agreements. The definition could reference the City of Olympia's existing EDI commitment.
- The draft Working Agreements include a subset of equity guidelines from the Councilmembers discussion. If the Council already has an existing set of EDI guidelines they work from, then adding the subset to that document would simplify their Working Agreements. If not, they could consider creating a related document for the equity agreements. It could specify how Councilmembers are advancing EDI as it pertains to their governance, collaborative culture and work with the community. This might benefit Councilmembers as they continue putting the agreements into practice while they meet city and community equity goals.
- In the Inclusion section of the Working Agreements, Councilmembers included the guideline to *reach out to different people to get involved from the community*. This seems to speak to equitable engagement, however, adding a definition would make it clear whose voices the Council aims to involve. In addition, it would be beneficial to define *leadership opportunities* and what is meant by *access to leadership*. Councilmembers expressed an intention to support equity in opening leadership to each other, yet the latter term could be misinterpreted as Council serving as gatekeepers. I would suggest listing specific ways that members share power and leadership in the Working Agreements.
- The Working Agreements include the guideline *It's ok to disagree*. Also mentioned was the perception that the community may not approve of Council being split over issues if they don't vote

unanimously. Dealing with disagreement is something the Council meets as part of their role. It is handled differently depending on one's culture and is naturally challenging for most people, bringing up feelings of discomfort or exclusion. The operating agreements are a great tool for working across differences in situations like this. I am curious about whether the Councilmembers would find conflict resolution and/or restorative justice skills to be helpful as they exercise these guidelines. The Council has a unique role in modeling the process of unity, while taking time to explore issues and balance disagreement.

Lastly, thank you to the Council for allowing me to help you create shared agreements. Participating in a facilitated conversation, in a public meeting with a more open approach, requires trust in the facilitator and the process. I am glad you honored me with this opportunity. I hope the agreements are adaptive tools that assist you in your work culture as you serve Olympia.