



Public Involvement Task Force Report: A Strategic Plan for Improving Public Involvement in the City of Portland

Executive Summary

October 2006

Office of Neighborhood Involvement
City of Portland

This summary report was completed after the PITF discontinued meeting.
It has not been formally approved by the PITF members.

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For more information on the Public Involvement Task Force go to:
<http://www.portlandonline.com/oni/index.cfm?c=29118>

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

In the Spring of 2003, Commissioner Jim Francesconi commissioned the Public Involvement Standards Task Force (PITF) to review and revise, as appropriate, the City's adopted Public Involvement Principles and identify gaps and inconsistencies in the implementation of the City government's public involvement processes. Supported by Commissioners Dan Saltzman and Randy Leonard, the PITF was charged with recommending a consistent set of standards for public involvement processes across City bureaus that are in accordance with the Public Involvement Principles, and take into account the needs of City staff and a diverse set of public interests.

Although it has been demonstrated that the City of Portland has relatively high rates of civic involvement and opportunities to participate in government decision making, public involvement principles and processes are not clearly codified in a way that causes their consistent implementation across City government. While the City has successfully implemented several public involvement processes, such as the Albina Community Plan, the Hollywood-Sandy Boulevard planning process and Parks and Recreation skate park siting, there have also been several high profile examples that were not a success, such as the Mt. Tabor Reservoirs, the Holocaust Memorial, Northwest District Plan, and the Southwest Community Plan.

In 1996, the City Council adopted a set of general public involvement principles by resolution. Resolutions, in general, are not enforceable, and this resolution, in particular, has had little effect on the operations of city government. Other attempts at guidance and regulation for citizen involvement have included a Citizen Involvement Chapter in Portland's Comprehensive Plan, a 1996 review of the Office of Neighborhood Involvement, and a few adopted planning documents, such as the Southwest Community Plan. Some City bureaus, such as the Bureau of Environmental Services and Parks and Recreation, have written public involvement policies while other bureaus rely on informal practices transmitted through on-the-job experience.

This hodge-podge of administrative effort does not provide the kind of comprehensive guidance critical to effective and consistent engagement of the public in government affairs. The effect of this is felt in the community when engagement activities vary dramatically from one project or bureau to the next. Confusion among participants about expectations for citizen involvement can quickly derail the process. Staff feels the effect when it is unclear from project to project what level or process of involvement is required or expected, and they must proceed with hesitancy, caution and, in some cases, fear.

Overall, the uncertainty shortchanges everybody – citizens, staff and elected officials – because civic capacity - or the ability and willingness of people to participate - is reduced. Civic capacity suffers when civic skills learned and relationships carefully built are not transferable from one arena or project to another; roles and capacities are not

clearly understood; critical stakeholders and opportunities for engagement are missed; more staff time and effort is required to build each civic engagement process from scratch; or there is worry for everyone about whether civic engagement will “get done right,” or be fair. The opportunity is created for anger or fear from past mistakes to carry into future processes.

Effective public involvement is essential to good governance and the health of our City because:

- ❑ Effective public involvement leads to better decisions.
- ❑ Effective public involvement is essential to ensure the legitimacy of government action and public understanding of and support for public policies and programs.
- ❑ Effective public involvement increases government accountability by increasing public awareness and understanding of public policy challenges, options, decisions, and results. Greater accountability also sheds light on government operations and reduces the likelihood of mistakes, poor decisions, and abuse of power.

Good quality public involvement leads to better decisions by ensuring that:

- ❑ Decisions are based on objective and thorough analysis of all the important factors.
- ❑ Community problems and needs are accurately and fully defined.
- ❑ The broad range of public goals and priorities affected by proposed policies and projects is identified.
- ❑ The full range of policy and project alternatives is identified.
- ❑ The likely impacts on the community and opportunities to maximize benefits and minimize the negative impacts are better understood.

THE PITF PROCESS

The PITF was comprised of 32 neighborhood and business association leaders, City staff, public involvement professionals, leaders from communities representing people of color, immigrants and refugees, and others. (See Appendix A for a list of PITF members.) The PITF sought early public input to identify issues and priorities by engaging over 400 people through 12 community forums, bureau staff interviews, and a public survey.

The PITF was then divided into six working groups with focal topics to review community input and then research and draft recommendations. The groups’ topics included 1) principles of public involvement; 2) process design and implementation; 3) diversity and accessibility; 4) accountability and transparency; 5) education and skills training; and 6) communication and access to information.¹

¹ The Office of Neighborhood Involvement has archived a wide range of materials that document the PITF process on the ONI website at:
<http://www.portlandonline.com/oni/index.cfm?c=29118>.

THE PITF OUTCOME

Each of the sub-groups brought their work back to the PITF as a whole to work together to find important common themes and overlapping elements that could be shaped into recommendations for public involvement standards. PITF members found, however, that some of the most critical issues, such as process design and early involvement, required deeper and broader community discussions to build consensus on recommendations than could be carried out within the PITF's time frame or forum. Therefore, the members of the PITF agreed to put forward a set of principles with implementing recommendations that can serve as a strategic plan to help foster these future community-wide discussions.

This strategic plan is built upon three foundational concepts: 1) the public should have a voice in the government decisions that affect their lives; 2) governance is a partnership between elected and appointed government officials, government staff and the public; and 3) the key to improving public participation is to develop a culture of city governance that encourages active community participation. Elected officials and other city government decision makers bear a strong responsibility for guarding and nurturing the public partnership; sharing power with the community; and recognizing and protecting diverse interests in the community. The public partnership must also extend to interactions and agreements that affect our community between the City of Portland and other government entities.

The strategic plan proposes that any evaluation of current public involvement practices and setting of future standards should be guided by these foundational concepts. This creates a view of the public as citizens² as opposed to clients or consumers, which are secondary roles. Any discussion of standards and guidelines should be based on the strategic plan's core concept of a governance partnership, the proposed 13 principles, and the 38 implementing recommendations summarized below. The principles and recommendations are grouped in four categories for ease of reference as follows:

- ❖ Foundations of Governance;
- ❖ Building Capacity;
- ❖ Process Design; and
- ❖ Government Accountability

Principles of Good Public Involvement

Core Concept—Governance as Partnership: City elected officials and staff must join with citizens to create a partnership in which the public has a real voice in setting the course of the community. Effective involvement of the public is essential to achieve and sustain this partnership.

² The term "citizen" is used here to denote a person actively engaged in civic activity and/or who belongs to a community as opposed to someone who has attained a specific legal status in the United States.

Public involvement processes should communicate the interests and meet the process needs of all participants—in city government and in the community. True “public involvement” requires a very different mindset, approach, and skills than “public information.” Good quality process design and implementation is crucial to the success of any public involvement process.

The following principles will help achieve this partnership. These principles set out a public involvement “bill of rights” and define what citizens should expect from city elected officials and city government staff. Portland’s elected city officials and city staff should follow the spirit and ethics laid out in these principles and engage the public in a true governance partnership to create, develop, implement, and evaluate legislative and administrative decisions and actions in our City. City elected officials and city staff must be accountable for the implementation of these principles.

FOUNDATIONS OF GOVERNANCE

1. **Culture of listening, hearing, and acting on public input:** Public input must be integral to the development and implementation of public policies, public works projects, public services, and other city government actions.
2. **Collaborative, consensus-seeking, community-based approach:** City government/community partnerships consistently should pursue collaborative, consensus-seeking, community-based approaches between all stakeholders when identifying policy priorities, and when creating, developing or implementing public policies, public works projects, public services, and other city government actions.
3. **Early Involvement:** The public should be involved early when a policy and project is being shaped—not after many important decisions have already been made and little realistic flexibility remains.
4. **Inclusiveness:** “Community” in Portland is made up of a rich diversity of groups and interests. City elected officials and city bureau staff should identify, reach out to, and involve the full range of community groups and interests in public dialogue and decision-making processes.

Recommendations:

- #1 Adopt the PITF governance partnership and Public Involvement (PI) Principles.
- #2 Rewrite the Comprehensive Plan Section 9 Citizen Involvement to reflect the governance partnership and PI Principles.
- #3 Amend the City Charter to support the governance partnership and PI Principles.
- #4 Review the composition, role and effectiveness of City boards and commissions and citizen advisory committees.
- #5 Establish stable funding mechanisms for public involvement processes.

BUILDING CAPACITY

5. Capacity within City Government: City elected officials, decision-makers, and staff must have the skills and will to support and achieve effective public involvement as set out in these principles.

Recommendations:

- #6 Review the role of ONI and its location in the structure of city government.
- #7 Develop staff education and training program on best practices and culturally appropriate public involvement skills.
- #8 Establish a formal networking group of public involvement and public information staff from different bureaus to meet regularly to review and discuss PI policies, projects and issues.

6. Capacity within the Community: Portland’s nationally-recognized formal neighborhood and business association system is a cornerstone of public involvement and a primary channel for citizen input and involvement in our City. It should play a pivotal role in creating opportunities for skill building and networking among both neighborhood/business association leaders and leaders of other community-based organizations.

Recommendations:

- #9 Adequately fund and expand citizen education and training in City processes and advocacy skills. Draw on the principles and procedures of the “popular education” model and the resources of the Neighborhood Association system, diverse community-based organizations, and existing institutional training programs.
- #10 Find new and meaningful ways to create networks between the Neighborhood Association System and other community-based groups that build collaboration among community members as well as with government officials and staff.
- #11 Develop a mechanism for identifying and funding community-identified needs.

7. Coordination and Consistency: City bureaus should coordinate their public outreach and involvement resources and activities to make the best use of city resources and public time and efforts.

Recommendations:

- #12 Create an internal citywide web-based management system for public involvement contacts.
- #13 Better coordinate diverse stakeholder contacts and relationship building efforts with community organizations and media.
- #14 Coordinate with Office of Affirmative Action’s Citywide Diversity Development Coordinating Committee to diversify public involvement efforts.

PROCESS DESIGN

8. Effective and Flexible Process Design and Implementation: Public involvement processes and techniques should be well-designed, appropriately fit the scope, character, and impact of the policy or project, and be able to adapt to changing needs and issues as a process moves forward.

Recommendations:

- #15 Require City bureaus to develop formal written PI policies that implement PI principles.
- #16 Refine and implement the biennial budget outreach process as the first early-involvement step that gives the public information about the bureaus' upcoming projects for the year.
- #17 Require written PI plans for certain types of major capital, policy and planning projects.
- #18 Develop processes and guidelines by which bureaus should design, direct, implement, provide feedback and evaluate public involvement processes for individual projects.

9. Ongoing Communication and Dialogue: City decision-makers and staff should establish clear, understandable, and ongoing communication and dialogue with the public and with formal groups in the community.

Recommendations:

- #19 Create a position of Public Information Officer to coordinate inter-bureau development of citywide communication and media relations.
- #20 Develop policies and a system for improving the quality, accessibility and transparency of public information, including addressing the digital divide.
- #21 Better utilize existing community resources for project outreach.

10. Diversity and Accessibility: Culturally appropriate and effective strategies and techniques should be used to reach out to and involve constituencies traditionally under-represented in the community—for example, people of color, immigrants and refugees, youth, people with low incomes, seniors, and people with disabilities.

Recommendations:

- #22 Expand efforts to make all public involvement events accessible to people with disabilities, seniors and other constituency groups. Require Americans with Disabilities (ADA) accessibility for all City public involvement events.
- #23 Work with the Purchasing Bureau to eliminate barriers for Minority, Women and Emerging Small Businesses to access professional, technical and expert contracts for public involvement and information services.
- #24 Improve accessibility of childcare services at key public involvement events to expand participation of families with children in City public involvement processes.
- #25 Expand language translation and interpretation accessibility of City information.

- #26 Engage youth and young adults in civic activities through community-based service learning.

GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

11. Accountability: City elected officials, decision-makers and staff must be accountable for following these governance and public involvement principles.

Recommendations:

- #27 Clearly state and incorporate responsibility for the development and implementation of public involvement plans in bureau employee position descriptions.
- #28 Include in formal personnel reviews for bureau directors, managers, and staff an evaluation of the individuals support for and compliance with public involvement principles.
- #29 Require bureau directors to provide to the City Council annual progress reports on their bureau's efforts to improve public involvement performance and efforts to implement these proposals.
- #30 Utilize the Ombudsman Office to respond to specific public concerns about public involvement implementation by city bureaus.
- #31 Require documentation of public involvement actions and outcomes to accompany all new ordinances presented for City Council consideration.
- #32 Establish a standing Public Involvement Advisory Commission to advise bureaus and hold the City accountable to adopted public involvement principles and guidelines. Create a Public Involvement position to adequately staff the Commission, among other duties.

12. Transparency of Governance and Processes: The public policy decision-making process should be accessible, open, honest, and understandable. Public participants should receive the information they need to participate effectively.

Recommendations:

- #33 Establish consistent policies and processes for responding to formal public records requests.
- #34 Develop clear criteria for putting items on the City Council's consent agenda—both routine and “emergency” ordinances—and make a summary statement and backup information available to the public.
- #35 Develop a more user-friendly system for providing public access to complex policy, planning and capital project-related documentation.

13. Evaluation: Mechanisms must be in place to allow ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and reporting of how well city elected officials, decision-makers, and staff follow these principles when developing and implementing public policies, projects, and services, and the effectiveness of individual public involvement processes.

Recommendations:

- #36 Implement regular evaluation of public involvement processes by bureaus.
- #37 Review bureau compliance with public involvement principles and requirements through formal performance and management audits.
- #38 Establish peer review of bureau PI plans by PI staff.

Next Steps

The principles and recommendations put forward by the PITF closely parallel Mayor Potter's vision for community governance. Some of the recommendations in the following report have already been or are being discussed by various teams that are part of Mayor Tom Potter's Bureau Innovation Project (BIP). The PITF sees this strategic plan as providing a critical large-scale overview of public involvement issues that can inform and organize the recommendations being pursued by the various BIP Teams. In fact, the BIP Teams can provide the kind of focused discussion that the PITF envisioned as carrying forward the PITF's recommendations. As each recommendation is pursued and/or resolved, the PITF's strategic plan can continue to be used as an organizing road map that guides the BIP Teams or other discussion forums. The strategic plan shows how each of the individual issues fits into improved public involvement overall.

The first step is for the City Council to adopt the PITF's strategic plan as a guiding document. If the City Council is unable or unwilling to adopt the PITF strategic plan in its entirety, the PITF recommends that it adopt, at minimum, the following top six core recommendations to institutionalize public involvement principles and processes in the formal legal framework of the City:

TOP SIX CORE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Adopt in ordinance the core concept of "governance as partnership" and the 13 Public Involvement Principles.
2. Require City bureaus to develop formal written public involvement policies that implement the adopted public involvement principles. Develop a model policy to serve as a framework.
3. Require written public involvement plans for certain types of major capital, policy and planning projects.
4. Ensure that culturally appropriate and effective strategies and techniques are used to reach out to involve constituencies traditionally under-represented in the community.
5. Establish a stable funding mechanism for public involvement processes.
6. Establish a standing Public Involvement Advisory Commission to advise bureaus and hold the City accountable to adopted public involvement principles, standards and guidelines. Create a Public Involvement Support position to adequately staff the Commission and issue an annual report, among other duties.

The members of the PITF hope that this document will serve as a practical tool for implementing long range activities by the City of Portland to improve its practices of involving the public in government decision-making processes. We thank the City Council for the opportunity to discuss these issues and make recommendations, and we sincerely hope the City Council will see our efforts as helpful in outlining a way forward.

Respectfully submitted,

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