

COMMUNITY FORUM ON CITY COUNCIL SKILLS AND ABILITIES
JANUARY 29, 2012

SUMMARY OF COMMUNITY FRUSTRATIONS AND WANTS

On January 19, 2012, a very diverse group of over 70 Portland community members gathered to talk about the skills and abilities community members want to see in mayoral and city council candidates in Portland.

The community forum was co-sponsored by: Center for Intercultural Organizing; Coalition for a Livable Future; East Portland Neighborhood Office; Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization; Latino Network; Native American Youth and Family Center; Neighbors West-Northwest; North Portland Neighborhood Services; Northeast Coalition of Neighborhoods; League of Women Voters of Portland; Southeast Uplift Neighborhood Coalition; Urban League of Portland.

Forum participants first discussed frustrations they've had working with Portland mayors and city council members and then positive experiences they've had. Participants used this information to identify important qualities, skills, and abilities they believe mayors and city council members need to serve the community effectively.

FRUSTRATIONS

Forum participants shared some of the frustrations they've experienced working with Portland city council members and mayors in the past. These include:

- **Un-informed policy proposals**: Elected officials who propose policies and programs without talking to the people and organizations who will be affected or doing much research into the problem, what's been tried before, and what's already being done.
- **Pet projects**: Elected officials who devote time and public resources to pet projects that may divert resources and attention away from higher community priorities and may be poorly thought through.
- **Imbalance between special interests and broader community interest**: Special interests that drive elected officials agendas and attention to their projects that are not balanced with other community needs and values.
- **Top-down governance**: Elected officials who try to dictate to the community rather than bringing community interests together to shape effective and sustainable solutions to community problems.
- **Saying people are apathetic**: Elected officials say people are apathetic, when many people are involved and care; but many feel that their government isn't interested in hearing from them and acting on their feedback.

- Elected officials are not accountable to the community; money has too much influence in city council elections: Community members perceive that big donors have too much effect on who gets elected to the city council and then have undue influence on the issues city council takes up and the decisions council members make.
- Lack of cultural awareness and competency: Elected officials who are unfamiliar with needs, interests, and life experience of Portland’s diverse communities, and don’t know how to work with these communities and don’t think to reach out and involve them in setting priorities and governance decisions.
- Feeling that public involvement is meaningless. Concern that too often City Council members already have decided how they’ll vote before a city council hearing and public testimony.
- Elected officials don’t listen to the opinions of people who don’t fit their idea of who gets involved with government. “I don’t fit the stereotype of someone integrated into government, so my opinions aren’t validated.”
- City Council members are disrespectful to community members and favor representatives of powerful groups at public hearings: City Council members often are patient, listen and engage with representatives of powerful organizations, but look bored, and rush along individual community members who testify.
- Listen but don’t care or act: Council members go through the motions of involving the community, but decisions already are made and council members don’t act on community input.
- Inconsistency of public involvement across different city bureaus: Each Bureau can interpret public involvement broadly and differently—this is a problem.
- Lack of adequate advance notice: “By the time we hear about things, it’s too late for public input.”
- Lack of information: “Lack of information from officials feels intentional: We need more information to give good input.”
- Insufficient long-term planning: “It’s important to be able to plan long-term and not get so caught up in the short term.”
- Lack of continuity in engagement when administrations change. “There’s a disconnect between engagement activities when city administrations change.”
- Disconnection between different interests: Political, bureaucratic, and citizen interests are disconnected and not aligned.

- Lack of time to participate: Who in the community gets involved becomes segregated because “many communities are busy with survival day to day and can’t access the process.”
- No independent legislative oversight: Portland’s commission form of government doesn’t provide for independent legislative oversight; city commissioners serve both legislative and administrative roles; a person can’t be effective in both.
- Lack of effective measurement and accountability for city council performance. Someone (e.g. Auditor’s Office) needs to measure and evaluate city council performance and bureau performance against clear and concise benchmarks.

GENERAL QUALITIES AND SKILLS COMMUNITY MEMBERS WANT TO SEE

The forum participants discussed and identified general personal qualities and values and specific skills, knowledge and experiences they’d like to see in city council candidates and members. Participants recognized that different individuals will have different skills and experiences and backgrounds—however they must all share values of inclusivity, shared governance with the community, and a strong interest in the common good.

This section presents a summary of the major qualities and skills identified by the participants.

Some General Qualities:

- Attitude of service to the community.
- More humility which leads to accessibility.
- Collaborative vs. top-down approach to governance and management.
- Value for involving and working with the community.
- Commitment to equity and inclusiveness.
- Strong value for community organizing and building community capacity.
- Championing openness and transparency.
- Commitment to moving forward and solving problems.
- Attention to detail.
- Strong work ethic.
- Integrity—open, truthful, keeping one’s word.
- Accountable to the community.

General Skills:

- **Convening/Mediation/Negotiation/Facilitation**
 - Ability to bring parties together and facilitate problem solving and conflicting choices.

- **Listening**
 - Ability to listen, take in input, understand it, and act on it.
- **Communication:**
 - Two-way communication; ability to listen and speak well in ways people can understand.
 - Talking with—not at—the community.
 - Comfortable and able to speak to the public.
 - Common courtesy and respect toward community members.
- **Community Involvement**
 - Support for collaborative (adult-adult) vs. top-down (adult-child) approach to governance relationship between government and community.
 - Knowledge, ability, and willingness to use and support community involvement best practices, techniques and strategies.
 - Comfortable with the “messiness” of public involvement.
- **Cultural competence and equity**
 - Deep understanding of equity, existing disparities in the community, and a commitment to do what it takes to remedy them.
 - Comfort with and experience in reaching out to, involving, and working with diverse communities and cultures in Portland.
 - Commitment to strong diversity in council staff and city workforce.
- **Connection to the Community/Strong Relationships:**
 - Ongoing outreach to build and strengthen relationships with the many, diverse communities in Portland.
 - Interest in and understanding of the particular needs and interests of different groups in Portland.
- **Openness and accessibility**
 - Availability to everyone—not just insiders; progress for the community comes through a sense of personal connection between leaders and the community.
 - No backroom dealing. Decisions made without community input often are not in the community’s best interest.
 - Ensure community members have access to the information they need to participate effectively.
- **Intelligence/knowledge/wisdom**
 - Well-rounded education.
 - Knowledge of city policies, issues, systems.
 - Learns quickly and understands issues.
- **Creativity and policy problem solving skills**
 - Takes in information and deliberates.
 - Analyzes and understands the nature of policy problems

- Seeks out and analyzes options
- Thinks creatively—seeks new ways of doing things.
- **Long-term Strategic Thinking**
 - Big picture thinking. Able to think through complex policy issues.
 - Ability to chart the course for the city.
- **Leadership and political skills**
 - Visionary and articulate.
 - Able to attract and inspire others.
 - Ability to work as a team with other council members and community leaders and members.
- **Administration and people management**
 - Self aware of own strengths and weaknesses--ability to hire and work with staff who have skills the candidate/elected official may not have.
 - Hiring, and retention of skilled, diverse staff people.
 - Effective management, delegation, direction of staff.
 - Ability to review effectively the performance of bureau directors and take corrective action when needed to hold bureaus accountable.
- **Knowledge of governance tools/rules**
 - Human resources; contracting, legal, program management, budgeting.
- **Accountability**
 - Ability to set commitments and follow through.
 - Ability to set benchmarks and measure progress.