

# **REPORT**

## ***Office of the Chief Administrative Officer***

**To:** Mayor Johnstone and Members of Council  
**Date:** May 8, 2023

**From:** Lisa Spitale,  
Chief Administrative Officer  
**File:**

**Item #:** 2023-320

**Subject: Potential Changes to City Advisory Committees Structure**

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### **RECOMMENDATION**

That Council endorse staff continuing to explore the Advisory Assembly model as a proposed pilot project as part of the City's advisory committees structure, and

That Council endorse staff engaging with current advisory committee members to get their feedback and input on the proposed Advisory Assembly model.

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### **PURPOSE**

This report outlines potential changes to the City of New Westminster's advisory committees structure, as part of Council's strategic planning process, and the suggested next step to seek feedback from existing committee members on the proposed Advisory Assembly model.

### **BACKGROUND**

Following the October 2022 municipal election, Council embarked on a strategic planning process to identify the areas of focus for this term. As part of that process, Council indicated a desire for the City's advisory committees to align closely with Council's strategic priorities. Moreover, a theme of the strategic planning discussions has been the importance of seeking meaningful public input into Council decisions. Council has indicated a desire to clearly hear the voices of advisory committees as part of the City's public engagement activities, and ensure committees are performing a best practice public engagement role.

Currently, advisory committees and Council task forces are linked based on the previous Council's strategic plan. The vision was that the committees and task forces would inform each other's work; however, this system has not worked as intended. There has also been a sense that the committees and task forces require extensive staff time and do not always result in meaningful engagement for participants and/or input that staff could apply to their work. An example here being that the limited number of committee meetings have made it hard to bring topics to the advisory committees at the community input stage of the projects.

Through its strategic planning discussions, Council asked staff to explore potential changes to the committee structure.

Questions about whether committees are working as intended, and potential changes to the committee structure, are common when a new Council is elected. After the previous election in 2018, the City embarked on a formal review process of committees and, as a result of the review, Council adopted a new committee structure that is currently in place based on the 2019-2022 Council's strategic priorities.

The current advisory committees have been in a holding pattern since January 2023. The committee term was due to end in January, with about half of committee members across the different groups set to finish their terms. Other committee members were due to start year two of their two-year terms. Council has twice approved motions to extend the current committee members' terms, and the term is now set to end on June 1, 2023. Some committees have continued to meet during this time, while several have cancelled meetings. Community members who applied during the fall recruitment process have been advised that they will get an update on their application following Council's strategic planning process.

## **DISCUSSION**

City staff have been researching other potential approaches to advisory committees. Key goals identified by staff are that any City advisory groups would:

- Include a diversity of members, reflecting the demographic make-up of the broader community
- Be highly participatory for members, with a clear role for committee input
- Be dialogue-based and deliberative, with group members seeking to provide a unified voice in their advice to the City
- Follow public engagement best practices, such as professional facilitation, reporting back how input was used, etc.
- Include a purposeful relationship-building component to foster connection between diverse community members and between residents and the City.

City staff have explored a number of potential options and considered pros and cons of each, as well as potential budget implications. Options considered include:

- Maintaining the current structure of committees and task forces organized around Council's priorities. The current committees would be restructured to align with Council's new focus areas.
- Moving to a system where committees would be more purposeful and time-bound. In this model, committees would only be struck to achieve a specific mandate around a project or topic, and then would be disbanded once the mandate is achieved.
- Moving to a structure where one larger, demographically-representative group of residents would be established to provide advice to the City on a range of topics, projects and initiatives. This would be similar to a citizens' assembly; however, with a variety of topics for deliberation rather than just focusing on one issue, which is the most common structure for a citizens' assembly. Staff are referring to this option as the Advisory Assembly model.

Through discussions to date with the City's advisory committees staff leads, senior leaders, other staff across the organization, and with Council through its strategic planning process, there is significant interest in exploring the Advisory Assembly model as a pilot program. Staff believe this model aligns with the key goals identified for committee-style public engagement.

Staff are continuing to explore the details of the Advisory Assembly model. Some recommended aspects include that the Assembly would be established through a blind selection process based on the intersectional demographic profiles of applicants, that the Assembly would be facilitated by the City's Public Engagement division with a professional facilitator, and that all Assembly members would be offered an honorarium for their participation.

Staff also recommend that piloting the Advisory Assembly model would still allow Council to strike other advisory groups, working groups, or task forces, for a specific topic or project, and that these could include any combination of stakeholders, staff, Council and/or residents.

There are other aspects of the Advisory Assembly model that are flexible and undetermined. For example, staff have discussed the option of the group connecting online in between meetings, options on the locations and days/times of meetings, options on how project staff (subject-matter experts) would interact with the group, and whether the group would operate on a majority rules or consensus basis.

Staff would now like to engage with existing committee members to seek feedback on the Advisory Assembly proposal, including these and other aspects of the model.

### **NEXT STEPS**

Pending Council's direction, City staff will invite current advisory committee members to participate in a facilitated discussion in late May / early June to provide their feedback

and input on the Advisory Assembly model. Committee members will be asked to choose between an in-person session and a virtual session, depending on their preference and availability. Reflecting the goal of relationship-based engagement, staff recommend including a shared dinner with participants for the in-person session.

Following the committee discussions, staff will report back to Council and the community on the input received and outline recommended next steps for potential changes to the City's committees structure.

### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Staff estimate the expenses for engaging with existing committee members to be approximately \$1,500. This expense would be largely for catering for the in-person engagement session, and can be accommodated within the approved 2023 operating budget.

If Council decides to pursue the Advisory Assembly pilot project, staff anticipate there would be an associated budget request related to hiring a professional facilitator to lead the group. However, staff also project a significant cost savings in departmental staff time currently required to plan and attend the current strategic priority committees.

Staff would come back to Council with a formal budget request related to the Advisory Assembly at a later date.

### **INTERDEPARTMENTAL LIAISON**

City staff from across the organization have been involved in providing feedback on their advisory committee work and experiences, and have provided feedback on the proposed concept of an Advisory Assembly of representative community members.

### **OPTIONS**

The following are options for Council's consideration:

1. That Council endorse staff continuing to explore the Advisory Assembly model as a proposed pilot project as part of the City's advisory committees structure, and
2. That Council endorse staff engaging with current advisory committee members to get their feedback and input on the proposed Advisory Assembly model.
3. Provide alternate direction to staff.

Options #1 and #2 are recommended.

**APPROVALS**

This report was prepared by:  
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This report was reviewed by:  
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This report was approved by:  
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