

# **REPORT**

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

**To:** Mayor Johnstone and Members of Council      **Date:** June 12, 2023

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

**Item #:** 2023-414

**Subject:** **Feedback from Committee Members on Potential Advisory Committee Changes**

---

### **RECOMMENDATION**

That Council receive the summary of feedback received from advisory committee members; and

That Council direct staff to prepare a workshop with Council on the future of committees on June 26, 2023.

---

### **PURPOSE**

This report provides Council with a summary of input heard from Advisory Committee members about their committee experiences and their feedback on a proposal for an “Advisory Assembly” – a potential new model for the City’s advisory groups.

### **BACKGROUND**

As part of Council’s strategic planning discussions, Council asked staff to explore potential changes to the structure of the City’s advisory committees. Council has indicated a desire for the City’s advisory committees to:

- align closely with Council’s strategic priorities,
- provide meaningful public input into Council decisions,
- include a diverse cross-section of the New Westminster community, and
- follow public engagement best practices.

City staff have been researching other potential approaches to advisory committees. Several options have been explored, and the pros and cons of each considered.

Through discussions to date, there has been significant interest in exploring a new model that would see one larger group of residents established to provide advice to Council and the City on a variety of projects, initiatives and topics. Importantly, the City would aim for membership of this group to be a representative sample of residents reflecting the diversity of the overall New Westminster community. This potential pilot program is currently being called an Advisory Assembly.

On May 8, 2023, Council endorsed staff continuing to explore the Advisory Assembly pilot as part of the City's advisory committee structure, and directed staff to engage with current advisory committee members to get their feedback on the Advisory Assembly proposal.

## **DISCUSSION**

Following Council's direction on May 8, staff sent email invitations to 87 current advisory committee members asking them to participate and share their feedback on the Advisory Assembly idea. Committee members were provided with the option to attend an in-person workshop, a virtual workshop, or provide their feedback by email. A total of four separate emails were sent to committee members between May 8 and May 31 with the invitation and reminders. Committee members who had already signed up for a workshop did not receive the reminder emails or the request for feedback by email.

A total of 42 committee members provided input either through a workshop or email. This includes 26 committee members at the in-person workshop on May 30 at Century House, eight at the virtual workshop on June 1, and an additional eight who sent feedback by email.

The workshops were structured with two short presentations and two group discussions. The first presentation provided an overview of the City's current advisory committee structure, why changes are being considered, and Council's new strategic priorities. Then participants had a discussion about their advisory committee experiences – what has been positive and worked well, and what they might suggest for changes or improvements. The second presentation then followed, providing an overview of the Advisory Assembly idea with tentative parameters such as frequency of meetings, group size, membership makeup, a proposed honorarium for members, and other potential details. A second, longer discussion period then followed where participants were asked to provide their feedback on the Advisory Assembly idea.

A summary of the themes heard from participants follows below. The summary includes input from both the in-person and virtual workshops, as well as feedback received by email. Detailed session notes from the workshops is included as Attachment 1.

## **Discussion One: Feedback on the Committee Experience**

### **What's Working Well: General Positive Experiences**

Many participants shared that their committee experiences have been generally positive. Committee experiences were described as “interesting and productive,” “enjoyable and informative,” and “very well run and very interesting.”

### **What's Working Well: Learning about the City**

One of the benefits of being part of a committee that was mentioned by many participants was the opportunity to learn about what the City does and current City projects. One participant shared: “I have learned so much about how the City works and doesn't work.” Another said, “It really made an impression on me that there is a lot of stuff going on that the average person out there has no idea of.”

### **What's Working Well: Well-Run Meetings, Role of Council and Staff**

Some participants shared that the Councillor chair of their group facilitated or led the group well, and some did a good job of sharing back with the committee updates on the items they previously discussed. Others mentioned appreciating the staff support in coordinating their committee, and the presentations provided. One participant shared: “The City staff member who is lead or secretary for the committee... is really important. If they are innovative and organized, so is the committee.” Related to this theme, a couple of participants said they appreciated the opportunity to make connections with other community members.

### **What Could be Improved: Feels Like Check-Box Engagement**

Many participants questioned how much influence committees were actually having on decision-making, and felt the role of providing advice was often lacking. Comments included that it “felt top-down,” that “we frequently seem to be in listening mode,” and that “it feels like they are ticking a box of public engagement but not actually doing public engagement.” A couple of participants said they would like committees to have the opportunity to make recommendations or bring forward initiatives, rather than only commenting on mostly-complete plans. One participant shared, “It has not been a bad experience, but it has not felt like advising.” Another said, “We generally rubber stamp what has previously been reviewed and approved by other parts of the City process.”

### **What Could be Improved: Lack of Follow-Up / Reporting Back**

Many participants said they would like to hear more about where the committee feedback has gone, and the outcomes of projects and initiatives they've discussed. One participant shared, “I would like to know what actually becomes of the issues that come to the committee.” Another asked, “What happens to the ideas that we propose?”

### **What Could be Improved: Lack of Clarity on Purpose / Mandate**

Several participants spoke about not being sure of their role or the expectations for the committee and their participation – especially early in their time as a committee member. Participants said they would like more clarity on the committee mandate, what the process will be, roles and responsibilities of members, expected time commitments,

etc. One participant said, “Our overall role in supporting the development of programs or policy for New West is not especially well articulated.” Related to this theme, a few participants mentioned that committees can become a forum for the personal complaints or requests of members.

### **What Could be Improved: Process Concerns – Lack of Education/Onboarding, Infrequent Meetings, Robert’s Rules of Order**

Participants shared feedback about how the committee process could be improved. Comments included requests for more committee onboarding, providing more background / historical and contextual information, and more time to prepare for meetings (i.e. reading agenda packages). Some participants said the restrictions of Robert’s Rules and meeting quorum requirements has been challenging. Others said the infrequency of meetings and meetings being cancelled due to lack of agenda items has been disappointing.

### **What Could be Improved: Concerns about Youth and Indigenous Representation**

Two perspectives in particular that participants mentioned they would like to see included on committees more were youth and Indigenous representation. A few participants said youth involvement has been valuable, and they would like to see more. Some also mentioned Indigenous representation as being important, and one noted that Reconciliation is part of all the work the City is doing. One participant observed that the current committee structure can feel tokenistic with youth and Indigenous representation, and noted it can feel like a check-box.

## **Discussion Two: Feedback on the Advisory Assembly Concept**

Overall, staff’s interpretation of the feedback from participants is that there was a mix of support and resistance to the Advisory Assembly concept. However, while some participants expressed general support or openness to the idea, the opposition expressed was focused on concerns about specific aspects of the proposal. In reviewing the feedback, staff have not identified a theme of general opposition to the concept. A summary of the themes identified follows below.

### **General Support for / Openness to Assembly Concept**

Several participants expressed overall support for the Advisory Assembly idea, and others said they had an open mind and were willing to try it. One participant suggested the model could address “some of the deficiencies” in the current advisory committee structure that were outlined in the first discussion. Another said it could “promote open dialogue, accountability, diversity, and inclusion.” Someone else said: “Overall, I see a lot of positives in this model and I want to express my optimism.” One participant said they liked the intent, but also had concerns.

## **Feedback on Moving from Groups Organized on Specific Topics to Assembly Providing Advice on Variety of Topics**

- **Concerns about losing specialized knowledge / only interested in some topics**

Many participants who expressed concerns about the Advisory Assembly concept spoke about the potential loss of specialized knowledge of some members if the group is focused on more broad issues. Some participants spoke about being drawn to their committee because of its specific topic focus, and that they are not interested in some of the City's projects or focus areas. One participant described the current committees as "special interest groups" and expressed concern that the broad structure would lose that "focus and passion on one issue."

- **Support for a group that would consider a variety of topics**

Other participants said they would enjoy providing input on a variety of topics, or that they liked that aspect of the Assembly concept. One participant said this type of model would work well for someone with broad interests, but less so for someone who is highly specialized. Another said having someone who is "engaged and interested" and who would "learn and participate... is more important than having special expertise." Someone else shared: "You may not be passionate about everything that is brought up, but it's good to have input on those other items."

## **Feedback on Potential Assembly Size of Approximately 50 Members**

Note: Staff explained to participants that the group size has not been determined and more analysis needs to be done to understand what group size would support establishing a representative sample of the community. However, staff have been working with an estimate of 50 members as they have explored the Assembly concept. Staff also explained that small-group breakout discussions would be a key feature of the larger group and that it would be highly-participatory and dialogue-based.

- **Concerns that 50 is too large**

Another key concern for participants who were less supportive of the Assembly concept was the larger group size. Several participants said they felt there would not be enough time to hear from everyone, and trying to would take too much time. One participant said, "I feel like there would be a problem for people to be heard, especially if there is supposed to be some back and forth." Another said it would be too hard for even a professional facilitator to handle that size of group. Someone else said that size of a group trying to reach consensus "might not turn out to be that practical."

- **Support for larger group**

Other participants expressed support for the larger group size or said it was not something they were concerned about. A few said having more perspectives and suggestions would be positive. One participant shared, "Fifty people is a great opportunity for letting people feel included in the community. The purpose of this is belonging." Another said they had participated in a large session with a professional facilitator and there was ample opportunity to be heard.

Related to this theme, a few participants expressed concerns about the potential for some interested community members to be excluded from the group due to the size limit.

### **Feedback on Proposed Honorarium for all Assembly Members**

Note: Staff explained to participants that the City is considering offering an honorarium to all Advisory Assembly members in recognition of the greater time commitment of more frequent meetings and the potential for additional work in between meetings. The City also recognizes some community members face financial barriers to participating in such an ongoing way. No amount has been decided, but participants were asked for feedback on a possible honorarium of \$1,500 per member per year.

- **Concerns about offering honorariums**

Many participants expressed concerns about offering honorariums to Assembly members. Several spoke about their own motivation to join a committee being a desire to contribute and volunteer, and they felt offering an honorarium changes that motivation for some people who may be more motivated by the money. One participant expressed concern about the added cost for the City in paying honorariums and another said that money should be put towards other things. A participant shared, "I don't think any of us join these committees to be paid. We want to affect what goes on in the city that we love."

- **Support for offering honorariums**

Several other participants spoke in support of offering honorariums. Participants shared that the honorarium would result in more diverse representation and address any financial accessibility challenges and direct costs such as child care. One participant shared, "Our current structure ensures that only the people who are participating are those who have the privilege to give that time freely, and that's not reflective of the community." A few participants said they felt offering an honorarium could also be tied to some formal accountability for members to participate in a meaningful way.

## **Feedback on the Potential Frequency of Monthly Meetings**

- **Concerns about frequency**

Some participants felt that monthly meetings would be too much of a commitment. One participant said, “As a single parent it would be difficult for me to come once a month.

Related to this theme, a participant said that in-person meetings would be a challenge – especially for people with disabilities.

- **Support for frequency**

A few participants said they liked the proposal for more frequent meetings and felt that momentum was lost on their current committee, which only meets four times per year.

## **Feedback on Roles of Staff, Council, Professional Facilitator**

Note: Staff explained to participants that the Advisory Assembly would be led by a professional facilitator. Participants were asked for feedback on what role they would see City staff playing in the group, and whether they would see an external facilitator as important.

Feedback from participants on this was mixed. A few expressed concerns about not having a Councillor as the Chair and said they have appreciated having a direct connection with Council on current committees. Others said they have appreciated staff’s role in committees and questioned the need for an external facilitator. Others commented that a facilitator hired by the City would not necessarily be unbiased.

Some participants expressed support for hiring an external facilitator, saying they could support the larger group size, help the group achieve its mandate and support accurate reporting back.

## **Feedback on Onboarding / Education for Members**

A few participants shared comments about the need for more education and onboarding with the Advisory Assembly model, given the breadth of topics. One participant said education in equity would be important, and another suggested the need for background education could be a barrier.

## **NEXT STEPS**

Pending direction from Council, staff will prepare a workshop with Council to discuss the future of committees, taking into consideration the feedback from current committee members, during the week of June 26, 2023.

**FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no financial implications.

**INTERDEPARTMENTAL LIAISON**

Staff from all departments have been included in discussions about the City's advisory committees structure, potential changes, and the Advisory Assembly pilot program.

**OPTIONS**

The following options are presented for Council's consideration:

1. That Council receive the summary of feedback received from advisory committee members; and
2. That Council direct staff to prepare a workshop with Council on the future of committees on June 26, 2023.
3. That Council provide alternate direction to staff.

Staff recommend options 1 and 2.

**ATTACHMENTS**

Attachement 1 – Detailed Session Notes from the In-Person and Virtual Workshops

**APPROVALS**

This report was prepared by:  
Jennifer Miller, Manager of Public Engagement

This report was reviewed by:  
Peter DeJong, Corporate Officer  
Jacque Killawee, Acting Records and Information Administrator

This report was approved by:  
Lisa Spitale, Chief Administrative Officer