

REPORT

Community Services

To: Mayor Johnstone and Members of Council
Date: May 12, 2025

From: Blair Fryer, Director, Community Services
File:

Item #: 2025-134

Subject: **Community Advisory Assembly Evaluation Results and Recommendations for the Future**

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *THAT staff be directed to continue with the Assembly model, with several adjustments to the Assembly Terms of Reference as outlined in the report titled "Community Advisory Assembly Evaluation Results and Recommendations for the Future," dated May 12, 2025 from the Director, Community Services.*
 2. *THAT staff proceed with the 6 next steps as outlined in the report titled "Community Advisory Assembly Evaluation Results and Recommendations for the Future," dated May 12, 2025 from the Director, Community Services, to prepare for a new Assembly year starting in September 2025.*
 3. *THAT staff add \$110K and an additional 0.5 FTE to the 2026 Budget process.*
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PURPOSE

This report shares the results of evaluation activities for the Community Advisory Assembly pilot project, and provides recommendations for the Assembly model moving forward.

BACKGROUND

The City's Community Advisory Assembly is a pilot project that was designed to test a new model for committee-style public engagement. The Assembly model differed in several ways from traditional advisory committees: larger group of residents; diverse membership that mirrors overall community demographics; covered a range of topics;

more frequent meetings; meetings based on dialogue and consensus; led by an external professional facilitator; variety of supports offered to members.

The pilot term ran from January 2024 to January 2025. The Assembly's mandate was to advise City Council and City staff across all departments on plans and actions related to Council's Strategic Priorities, and other current City projects, plans, and policies.

The Assembly discussed and provided recommendations to the City on a variety of topics, including: community belonging and connecting; road reallocation; climate action and intersectionality; cultural observances; and evaluation of the Assembly model. Assembly members presented the group's recommendations to Council in May and December 2024, and an update report was provided to Council in November 2024.

Information about the application and selection process for the Assembly can be found [here](#). The Assembly's [Terms of Reference](#), which were adopted at the start of the pilot by the members and by Council, outline additional information about the structure and procedures of the group. More details about the Assembly meeting schedule and meeting minutes are available [on this page](#).

In [February 2025](#), Council received a summary of feedback from the group on the Assembly Terms of Reference. Council also endorsed several next steps related to evaluating the pilot project, reporting back on the evaluation results, and development of recommendations for the future of the Assembly model.

DISCUSSION

Several evaluation activities have been completed to seek input on Assembly experiences and measure impacts and outcomes of the pilot. Evaluation included:

- Facilitated discussion and feedback from the Assembly as a group (see Attachment 1; Council previously received this summary in February 2025)
- Individual evaluation surveys completed by Assembly members, City Council, staff who interacted with the Assembly, and Assembly Steering Committee (see Attachments 2 and 3 for survey reports)
- Individual research interviews (optional) for all groups above, with a PhD candidate researcher from Simon Fraser University (see Attachment 4 for report)

Highlights of evaluation results

Across all evaluation activities, there was significant support for continuing with the Assembly model. This includes a unanimous recommendation from the Assembly at its December 2024 meeting that the City should continue the Assembly. As well, in the post-term survey for Council, Steering Committee and staff, all participants said the City should either "continue with this model" (44%) or "continue with this model but with some minor adjustments" (56%).

In terms of the overall experience, 87% of Assembly members who completed the post-term evaluation survey rated the experience as “Excellent” or “Good.” Council, Steering Committee and staff were also asked about their overall experience interacting with the Assembly, and 90% of survey participants rated the experience as “Excellent” or “Good.”

When asked if the Assembly members would recommend others to apply for the Assembly if it’s renewed, 87% of those who completed the post-term survey said “Yes,” with 10% answering “Not sure/Don’t know” and 3% (one member) saying “No”. Ninety per cent (90%) of members said they would encourage others to engage with the City through opportunities other than the Assembly.

Conducting both pre- and post-term evaluation surveys allows for comparisons between expectations for the Assembly process at the outset with participants’ reported experiences and outcomes at the conclusion. Across both the members’ surveys and questions posed to Council, Steering Committee and staff, positive shifts were seen in several areas. Negative shifts were also seen for a few questions, and others saw minimal change between the pre- and post-survey results.

In the Council, Steering Committee and staff surveys, there was an increase in perceptions of the Assembly members being representative of the diversity of New Westminster. The percentage of participants who felt the group would be representative increased from 72% in the pre-term survey to 95% at the end of the pilot. As well, in the post-term survey, 100% of participants said they felt adequate efforts were made to include residents that are often under-represented. This was an increase from 84% in the pre-term survey. However, the proportion of participants who said they felt the Assembly would provide useful information or perspectives for the City’s decisions declined in the post-term survey, from 92% to 72%. There was an increase in uncertainty for this question, with 17% answering “unsure” and 11% (two individuals) answering “no” at the end of the Assembly year.

Comparing the pre- and post-term survey results for Assembly members, a significant positive shift was seen in the level of understanding of what the City is responsible for in residents’ lives, as well as familiarity with how the City engages with residents. At the end of the pilot year, all Assembly members who completed the survey said they felt they have at least a little bit of say in decisions the City makes that affect residents. Members who said they have “some say” or “a lot of say” increased from 50% in the pre-term survey to 74% at the end of the term.

When asked about how independent they felt the Assembly process will be/was, there were both members who reported a greater feeling of an independent process, and members who reported a less independent process than what they expected at the start of the term. Overall, members who said they felt the process would be/was “very independent” or “somewhat independent” increased from 77% at the start of the term to 87% at the end. However, four members rated the process as “not very independent” or “not independent at all” in the post-term survey.

Overall perceptions about the City's responsiveness to the Assembly's recommendations also increased by the end of the pilot term. Members who said they felt the City would be "very responsive" or "somewhat responsive" to Assembly recommendations increased from 63% in the pre-term survey to 90% at the end of the term.

In their feedback on the Terms of Reference, which were discussed at the December 2024 meeting, Assembly members supported most aspects of the structure and processes currently outlined. Suggestions for adjustments or additions included: adjusting the process to choose topics, additional accountability and regular reporting back to the Assembly, offering the option of a two-year term, including alumni in various ways, ensuring ongoing evaluation, and working to raise community awareness about the Assembly.

Finally, the evaluation report authored by SFU researcher Elodie Jacquet, which was based on interviews with Assembly members, staff and two Councillors, highlighted the success of the pilot in equity and inclusion. Key areas identified for improvement include: choosing topics for the Assembly to discuss and more clearly connecting the Assembly's work to City decision-making, as well as sharing information about the Assembly in the community.

Recommendations for the future

Incorporating input from the Assembly pilot project evaluation activities, City staff have developed several recommendations that would be reflected as changes to the Community Advisory Assembly Terms of Reference should Council support continuation of the model and the recommendations.

Other than the recommendations outlined below, all remaining key aspects of the Terms of Reference would remain the same, such as retaining a professional, external facilitator to lead the group; demographic representation of Assembly membership; a focus on dialogue and reaching consensus; supports offered to members; etc.

Additional minor adjustments would be made as per the pilot group's feedback, such as frequently rotating seating, inviting relevant community presenters, offering opportunities for Assembly alumni to remain involved, and ensuring ongoing evaluation.

1. Continue the Assembly model, with some adjustments.

- A new Assembly term would start in September 2025.
- Moving forward, the Assembly year would run September to June.
- The Assembly would be specified as one mechanism in a variety of public engagement activities at the City of New Westminster. It is not intended to replace traditional advisory bodies, with several of these still underway and expected to continue (for example, Vision Zero Task Force; Mayor's Youth Climate Action Leadership Team; Accessibility Advisory Committee;

Arts, Culture and Economic Development Advisory Committee; Grants Committees; and others)

2. Introduce the option of a two-year term for up to half of Assembly members.

Terms would be staggered between one and two years, allowing for some continuity as well as new members each year.

- A new application process would be undertaken for the 2025-2026 term, and members of the pilot Assembly would be invited to reapply to serve for a second year.
- In any given year at least half of the group would be new members. Preference for a one- or two-year term would be included in the application.
- Demographic representation will remain a key priority for the overall Assembly membership, which could impact the ability to meet applicants' preferences for two-year terms.
- As with the pilot, an open call for applications would be widely promoted, with all New Westminster residents encouraged to apply.

3. Allocate more resources towards identifying and choosing topics.

- Proceed with an understanding that 4-5 topics can be covered during the 10-month Assembly year (Sept.-June).
- A balance would be sought between City-generated topics and Assembly-generated topics, with increased clarity around how topics align with the City's current work plans and decision-making processes.
- Council, staff and Steering Committee members would all have an opportunity to propose topics before the new term begins. Assembly members would work together at the start of the term to identify topics the group would like to discuss.
- At least some potential topics for the year would be identified before the application period opens, to provide applicants with an idea of what the Assembly could discuss.
- Some flexibility would be retained to allow for an emergent topic to be identified during the Assembly year.
- Staff would also explore the possibility of the Assembly being involved in a participatory budgeting initiative, should a future decision be made for the City to pursue participatory budgeting. Participatory budgeting is a process where residents are directly involved in deciding how to spend a defined portion of the City's budget. Typically, residents and/or community groups propose projects that include cost estimates, and residents vote to determine which projects are funded within the budget allocated.

4. Develop more defined processes for staff to regularly report back to the Assembly about whether and how their input can be applied to the City's work and decision-making.
 - Council and City staff would both have a role in demonstrating accountability to the Assembly's efforts and sharing back how their input is being used.
5. Allocate more resources towards sharing information about the Assembly in the community.
 - In addition to regularly communicating about the Assembly's work to the public, opportunities would be explored for including the broader community in the Assembly process. This could include integrating Assembly deliberations with other public engagement activities, and/or supporting Assembly members in seeking input through their networks.
6. Offer more opportunities for Council to interact with the Assembly.
 - Both formal and informal opportunities would be explored, such as Council workshop meetings, informal time before or after Assembly meetings, etc.
7. Establish a new "Assembly Liaison" 0.5 FTE position to support additional efforts related to identifying topics, reporting back, communications, and coordinating additional events/meetings that support the Assembly model.
 - Coordination of the Assembly would continue to be led by the City's Public Engagement division. The Assembly Liaison 0.5 position would join the Public Engagement team.

NEXT STEPS

Pending Council's direction, staff will work to prepare for a new Assembly year by:

1. Updating the Assembly Terms of Reference, as per the recommendations included in this report. An updated Terms of Reference would come forward to Council for approval before being finalized.
2. Re-establishing the Steering Committee, including Assembly alumni as Steering Committee members.
3. Working with staff, Steering Committee and Council to identify topic ideas for the 2025-2026 Assembly year.
4. Issuing a Request for Proposals for an external facilitator to lead the group.

5. Preparing for and launching the application period, including updating the application form, promoting the opportunity, direct outreach to under-represented groups, etc.
6. Scheduling and coordinating monthly Assembly meetings and related events, to begin in September 2025.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

For 2024, a one-time budget enhancement of \$80K was approved by Council to undertake the Community Advisory Assembly pilot project. The \$80K combined with internal budget reallocation facilitated successful pilot project delivery in 2024, expenditures for which totaled \$85K and included:

- \$64K Contract Facilitation
- \$11K Member Support
- \$10K Catering and Venue Costs

For 2025, a one-time budget enhancement of \$50K was approved by Council to support potential costs should Council decide to continue with the Assembly model. Staff expect this will be sufficient if a new Assembly term starts in September 2025.

However, an annual budget allocation plus additional staff resources will be required in order to continue with the Assembly in an ongoing way and deliver the recommended adjustments to the model that were identified through the pilot evaluation.

Staff estimate a total annual budget of \$110K and an additional 0.5 FTE are required to deliver the adjusted Assembly model as outlined. Additional expenses moving forward are anticipated to reflect increasing costs, support additional events and meetings with Council, alumni, community members, etc., and include communications activities and materials.

Pending Council's direction, these budget requests would be included in the 2026 budget process.

INTERDEPARTMENTAL LIAISON

The City's Senior Management Team reviewed and provided feedback on draft recommendations for the future of the Community Advisory Assembly model. The Assembly is led by the Public Engagement division, with several Departments having supported the Assembly pilot year, including Legislative Services, Engineering, Energy and Climate Action, Planning and Development, Parks & Recreation, and several divisions in Community Services.

OPTIONS

There are four options for Council's consideration:

1. That staff be directed to continue with the Assembly model, with several adjustments to the Assembly Terms of Reference as outlined in the report titled "Community Advisory Assembly Evaluation Results and Recommendations for the Future," dated May 12, 2025 from the Director, Community Services.
2. That staff proceed with the 6 next steps as outlined in the report titled "Community Advisory Assembly Evaluation Results and Recommendations for the Future," dated May 12, 2025 from the Director, Community Services, to prepare for a new Assembly year starting in September 2025.
3. That staff add \$110K and an additional 0.5 FTE to the 2026 Budget process.
4. That Council provide staff with alternative direction.

Staff recommend options 1, 2 and 3.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1 – Community Advisory Assembly's Comments on Terms of Reference, January 2025

Attachment 2 – Assembly Pre- and Post-term Evaluation Survey Results: Council, Steering Committee and Staff, April 2025

Attachment 3 – Assembly Pre- and Post-term Evaluation Survey Results: Members, April 2025

Attachment 4 – SFU Researcher Assembly Evaluation Report, April 2025

APPROVALS

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