

City of Cambridge

The Government Operations Committee held a public meeting on Wednesday, March 25, 1998, beginning at 2:00 p.m. in the Ackermann Room for the purpose of planning a follow-up facilitated consideration of the City Council's goals prior to deliberations on the FY 99 budget in accord with an order submitted by Councillor Triantafillou and adopted by the City Council on February 9, 1998, and discussing a proposal submitted by Councillor Toomey for regular reports to the City Council from the Auditor.

Present at the hearing were Councillor Sheila Doyle Russell, Chair of the Committee, Councillor Kathleen L. Born, Councillor Henrietta Davis, Councillor Timothy J. Toomey, Jr., Councillor Katherine Triantafillou, and City Clerk D. Margaret Drury. Also present were City Auditor James Lindstrom, Assistant to the City Council Sandra Albano and Roberta Miller.

Councillor Russell convened the hearing and explained the purpose. She invited Councillor Triantafillou to begin with some background regarding the order to have a follow up on the goal setting training of last fall.

Councillor Triantafillou stated that the question as put in the February 9, 1998 order is whether the Council's goals need to be adjusted for the upcoming budget. The idea is to flesh out the skeletal goals. She noted that she submitted two related orders at that time and both were referred to the Government Operations Committee. The other order is directed toward establishing an annual process for consideration of goals and objectives in a time frame that fits into the City Manager's budget development process. The April meeting could be quite short, really just a time to do any small adjustments needed for the FY 99 budget process.

Councillor Davis stated that some goals clearly needed to be adjusted, for example, those relating to the end of rent control. The City Clerk noted that the City Council had developed a priority for youth in the fall goal setting training, but that goal was left out when the current list of priorities was created from the overall materials.

Councillor Russell stated that it is important to take a look at the City Council goals in conjunction with the school goals. Councillor Davis noted that an order listing traffic and transportation priorities from the traffic and transportation roundtable was also referred to the goal setting session, which is scheduled for April 8, 1998.

Councillor Russell stated that some City Council members may have different ideas of how the April 8, 1998 meeting should be structured.

Councillor Davis suggested spending some time on the City Manager's goals and how they match up with the City Council's goals.

Councillor Triantafillou stated that there is also needs to be some thought as to some component of public participation. There are some cities that actually go through a long process of adopting a strategic plan with a great deal of public input and participation.

Ms. Miller noted that there are many possibilities for a wide range of public involvement.

Councillor Davis stated that she would like to see how the City Council Committee structure could relate more to the goals.

Councillor Russell stated that she has some concern about the public process part because while there are many activists, there are many more citizens who are not activists and would not participate in this kind of a meeting.

Ms. Miller stated that there are ways to get at that issue, for example the City Council can make a strong attempt to reach the people who wouldn't come to public meetings, perhaps with targeted meetings at a place where they would go.

Councillor Davis stated it was very helpful to have the opportunity to discuss goals with the administrative staff at the round tables that took place recently.

Councillor Russell suggested using the "work-study" concept for that. These are informal nonvoting meetings that some other City Councils hold, either once a month or before the regular meeting begins. They are public meetings, but they are not meetings at which the public provides testimony.

Ms. Miller stated that it sounds like the Council is interested in having a subset of the meeting where the discussion goes on somewhat differently. It would be a change from the more "theatrical" behavior at the meetings.

Councillor Davis stated that the City Council could use a paradigm shift. There are two hours of public testimony and then the "theatrical" behavior. The deliberative piece is missing. There is very little back and forth.

Councillor Triantafillou said that at the last two meetings there was more discussion and deliberation.

Councillor Toomey stated that he is going to have to leave to get back to the State House but he wants to urge the committee to look favorably upon his proposal to have the Auditor come to the City council meetings to make regular reports.

Councillor Toomey stated that the City Council should look at how much time individual Councillors speak.

Councillor Davis noted that Robert's Rules calls for a ten minute limit to time that each member has the floor. The Council could decide to adhere to that rule or agree upon some other time limit.

Councillor Russell stated that at the she believes there should be a City Council Rules Committee meeting to consider the discussion format of the meetings.

Councillor Born stated that at the National League of Cities NLC Conference, she and Councillor Russell spoke with City Councillors from two different municipalities that employed the "work/study" council meeting format.

In one place, every fourth meeting was a work study meeting with no votes taken, the other municipality has a workstudy meeting before every Council meeting. Much of the present meeting time in Cambridge is devoted to City Councillor asking for information. A seven hour meeting may not be the most effective way and efficient way to conduct information gathering.

Ms. Miller stated that there are a couple of goals that elected officials typically have with regard to public questioning at the Council meeting. One is gathering information for the City Council members to make a decision; the other is to get information to the public.

Councillor Davis stated that the current City Council practice is for each Councillor to ask all his or her questions in one turn. It does not have to be that way. Also the Sullivan Chamber is a difficult room to work in because members are so far from each other.

Councillor Born asked what would happen if the city staff was available at 4:30 in the Ackerman Room to answer questions. Councillor Triantafillou stated that she thinks it is an excellent idea; she proposed it several years ago. Councillor Davis stated that that sounds interesting.

Ms Miller stated that some municipalities have a pre-meeting called a "conference," which is scheduled around a particular issue. In the present arrangement the staff does not have much opportunity to hear what the City Council is thinking.

Councillor Triantafillou stated that the executive sessions are very productive. She questioned whether this is because it is not televised.

Ms. Miller noted that televising the meetings has a big effect on what goes on at the meetings.

Councillor Davis noted an interesting book or democracy and deliberation by Dennis Thompson and Amy Gutmen.

Councillor Russell noted that there is at this time an enormous suspicion of government on the part of the public.

It was agreed that the April 8, 1998 meeting will focus on the City Council meeting format and on a review of the existing goals to see how they fit with the budget, keeping in mind the Schools goals as well.

Councillor Russell then moved the discussion to the issue of the Auditor. Councillor Triantafillou stated that the City Council does not utilize the Auditor very well. The point is not to be harmful but to be able to get more information. It could reduce the grilling that happens to the City Manager.

Councillor Davis stated that she believes that this issue belongs in the Finance Committee. It is a financial issue, and she is not interested in having the already full City Council meeting devoted to that information every other week.

Councillor Born stated that she would like to see quarterly reports and she would like the opportunity to work with the auditor to figure out what information would be useful. It might be a good idea to have the reports go to the Finance Committee.

Councillor Russell asked Mr. Lindstrom if he does quarterly reports. Mr. Lindstrom stated that he does not; he does monthly reports now, but it would not be difficult to produce quarterly reports.

Councillor Triantafillou asked James Lindstrom if it would be a problem for him to meet more regularly with the City Council. James Lindstrom stated that he would welcome the opportunity. He said that he is in the process of hiring a field auditor and thus the office will have more capacity. One area he would like to look into is the areas of services that are provided by private contractors.

Councillor Born asked how this would fit in with the idea of work/study sessions.

Councillor Born asked James Lindstrom if he could design a menu of possible choices.

Councillor Triantafillou stated that her questions are related to whether the practices are fiscally sound, is the department being run efficiently.

James Lindstrom stated that the City Council has taken steps in that direction with performance based budgeting. Another possibility is to compare Cambridge with other communities of similar size.

Councillor Davis stated that at this stage the conversation needs to be focused on what information the City Council would like to get from the Auditor. It was agreed that James Lindstrom will prepare a memo with some suggestions as to format and information to be provided, and that the issue will remain in committee.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:45 p.m.

For the Committee,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Sheila T. Russell". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Councillor Sheila Russell,
Chair

Committee Report #3

F-38

Communciation was received from D. Margaret Drury, City Clerk, transmitting a report from Councillor Russell, Chair of the Government Operations Committee, for a meetng held on March 25, 1998 for the purpose of planning a follow-up facilitated consideration of the City Council's goals prior to deliberations of the FY '99 budget.

In City Council April 13, 1998

Report Accepted.

PLACED ON FILE