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Audit Follow-Up Report #7 September, 2004 Citizen Involvement Committee

Background

In 1984 voters approved an amendment to the County Charter establishing the Citizen Involvement Committee (CIC). Its purpose was to facilitate communication between citizens and the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC).

This report is a follow-up to an audit of the CIC issued in December, 2002. The original audit of the CIC was added to the FY02-03 Audit Schedule at the request of the CIC and concerned citizens. Its purpose was to assess the effectiveness of citizen involvement in Multnomah County government through the CIC. The Auditor's Office was requested to provide an objective review of the CIC's function, the County's role in citizen involvement, and the CIC's future role in the County.

The audit concluded that the County's avenues for citizen involvement were organizationally weak and that the roles and responsibilities of the CIC were unclear. The audit recommended that the BOCC approve an ordinance to clarify the County's responsibility in providing a stronger citizen involvement process and the role of CIC.

Scope and Methodology

The objective of this follow-up was to determine how the County had progressed in following the audit recommendations. We interviewed the current CIC chair and staff, and representatives of the County Chair's Office, as well as surveyed department directors, CIC members, and the BOCC.

We reviewed CIC minutes, planning documents, reports, and publications. This audit was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Accomplishments

In the year and one-half since the audit was issued, the role and activities of the CIC have been strengthened considerably. The office has moved to the ground floor of the Multnomah Building, in close proximity to the Board of County Commissioners and the Board Hearing Room. This move was assisted by County Chair's Office, which located the space and helped with space design. This move is also positive because it increases CIC visibility to citizens and accessibility.

CIC members participated in a planning retreat in August 2003 to develop an action plan for FY03-04. Members agreed that the CIC was a centralized resource that facilitated communication between the citizens and their county government. According to the retreat notes, the purpose of the CIC is to help identify citizen involvement opportunities, monitor and evaluate citizen involvement programs, respond to concerns about citizen involvement process, and provide County departments and programs with expertise in effectively using citizen involvement.

The members set a goal to become a more visible, credible, and integral partner in County governance. Two areas of action were agreed upon: the first was to determine a current baseline of citizen involvement activities and barriers to citizens becoming involved;

and the second was to determine the level of citizen interest to become involved in the County.

Since the retreat, the CIC has worked on a review of the citizen involvement processes in the County. The CIC met with representatives of boards and commissions and staff from various departments, as well as surveyed citizens to gain an understanding of current involvement by citizens. The CIC issued an interim report with findings and eight recommendations for change. While not yet finalized, two of the recommendations were for CIC action and the remaining recommendations were directed towards the County Chair's Office or the BOCC.

Based upon our survey of CIC members, department directors and the BOCC, perceptions of the CIC role and communication had improved. Three of the five directors who responded indicated that the role of the CIC was clear and that the County listened to the CIC. All reported having contact with the CIC in the last year. Although the response rate for CIC members was low (36%), three out of the four members who responded thought that communication between the County and CIC had improved.

Areas of Concern

Since the audit, the CIC has increased its information about citizen involvement as it currently exists in the County, and both the CIC and the County Chair's Office have worked on improving communication and working relationships. However, the audit recommendations have not been implemented or addressed. A task force was not convened to re-write the ordinance governing citizen involvement and a new ordinance has not been approved by the BOCC.

The County Code defines the role and functions of the CIC as well as seven other citizen advisory groups. The County has additional citizen involvement opportunities that are not established by Code. There is no coordinated oversight of any of the citizen advisory groups to ensure the quality and effectiveness of citizen representation. For example, aside from the CIC, the County is lacking these coordinated options for citizen involvement:

- A record of citizens who wish to participate or currently are participating

- An information and referral access point to make it easy for citizens to find opportunities to volunteer
- A training program for departments on how to effectively recruit and use citizen input
- A training and orientation program for newly recruited citizens

County should proceed with implementing recommendations

The CIC has moved forward and completed work that seems aligned with a role of advocate, monitor, and evaluator of County citizen involvement. The County has not clarified its role and responsibilities in citizen involvement. The Chair's Office should convene a task force soon to make recommendations to the BOCC on updating the organization of citizen involvement in the County.



Diane M. Linn, Multnomah County Chair

September 17, 2004

Dear Auditor Flynn,

Thank you for your follow up audit of Multnomah County's Citizen Involvement program. I remain very committed to finding ways to improve our efforts to effectively engage the public and believe your audit has helped focus on areas which need our continued support.

Specifically, you raise facets of our citizen involvement efforts that I agree need to be strengthened:

- Capturing data about current levels of citizen participation across the various departments of the County to better understand and address areas where citizen involvement can be improved;
- Creating a central access point for citizens who are looking for ways become involved in County government;
- Providing training to departments and to the members of the public who volunteer their time.

I believe the CIC has spearheaded significant progress in each of these areas and is working in close coordination with our departments. In light of the reinvigoration of the CIC over the last year, I am very optimistic that we can continue to strengthen our level of public involvement. This includes the partnership of the CIC, and the CBAC's in the County's budget priority setting process in preparation for a sunset or repeal of the I-Tax.

I have also asked my staff to work directly with the CIC, and with the input of interested Commissioners, to form a work group to review the governing Ordinance for the CIC. My intent is that this work group would bring forward any recommendations to the Board of Commissioners within 6 months.

Finally, I want to take this opportunity to extend my congratulations and thanks to the staff and leadership of the CIC for their dedicated work this past year: Ross Williams, Kathleen Todd, Ken Ray, and M'Lou Christ.

Sincerely,

Diane M. Linn



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The Honorable Suzanne Flynn
Multnomah County Auditor
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September 14, 2004

Dear Auditor Flynn:

On behalf of the Citizen Involvement Committee (CIC), I want to express our thanks and appreciation for the work that you and your office have put into the audit and follow-up report on the CIC. The audit, released in November 2002, provided insight and guidance to the CIC and our staff in the Office in Citizen Involvement in clarifying the roles of the CIC and in outlining improvements that were needed to strengthen and promote greater citizen involvement in the County. The follow-up report provides some very important validation of the work that the CIC has undertaken to improve citizen involvement in Multnomah County.

As you note in your follow-up report, the CIC has taken many of the recommendations found in your earlier audit and set out to establish itself as a centralized resource for citizens, county departments, and elected officials in promoting greater opportunities for citizen involvement, in providing assistance and training to departmental staff in how to best utilize and facilitate citizen involvement, and in clarifying the roles and responsibilities of the CIC compared with those of the County departments and elected officials in promoting and facilitating citizen involvement.

As noted in the follow-up report, the CIC has undertaken a comprehensive assessment of citizen involvement opportunities and programs in the County to gain a greater awareness of the needs of citizens and departments in providing enhanced opportunities for citizens to give valuable expertise and insights into the operations and policy decisions of the County. We have more work to do. The areas of concern that you raised in the follow-up report are under consideration by the CIC, and we hope to implement many of the ideas you have articulated.

We also look forward to working closely with the County Chair and Board of Commissioners to form a task force, as you suggested, to clarify in ordinance the roles of the CIC and of the Commissioners in promoting citizen involvement within the County. We hope our assessment of current citizen involvement programs and opportunities will help inform that discussion.

Thank you again for all of your work in developing the audit and follow-up report. We will continue to keep your office informed of our continued progress in achieving the recommendations you have outlined and in building a stronger citizen involvement program in Multnomah County.

Respectfully submitted,

Ken Ray

Ken Ray
Chair, Citizen Involvement Committee