

To: Mr. Scott Sanders, City Manager
City of Des Moines

From: Jacquelyn McCray, Director
Scott Meyer, Special Advisor

Subject: City Council Governance Facilitation Results and Next Steps

Date: June 21, 2023

Introduction and Background

Baker Tilly was hired to assist the Des Moines City Council with identifying priority areas for enhanced effectiveness and operations. On May 23, 2023, the Mayor and City Council were joined by the city manager, deputy city manager, assistant city managers, the city attorney, and department directors for a half-day workshop to review current operating procedures and practices that hinder effectiveness.

In advance of the workshop, Baker Tilly conducted interviews with each City Council member and the city manager to learn about key strengths, opportunities, challenges, and top priorities for the future. Additionally, Des Moines Council members identified what Council needs from staff and what staff should receive from the Council for enhanced effectiveness.

City Council Issues and Concerns

After reviewing good governance best practices for council operations, the City Council voiced a range of concerns related to city regulation and adopted plans, performance management, and operating procedures. The workshop results are included for your review, feedback, and discussion.

City Regulations and Adopted Plans

Council members voiced frustration with the amount of time that it takes owners and applicants to receive city approval(s) for business operations and development permissions as included below.

- The time it takes for applicants to apply for and receive zoning building approvals
- Lack of clarity about the status of proposed changes to current codes and regulations such as the ordinance on vacant buildings
- Status of approved plans for Safe Streets, street conditions and improvements, sewer/water plan have not been organized into a combined list.

Council members discussed the desire to make “getting to yes” for residents and business owners (associated with city regulations and adopted plans) less time consuming.

Performance Management

Council members want to identify an approach that staff can use to keep them informed about the status of projects and initiatives approved by the Council. There was consensus about the need for a citywide strategic plan that will focus the allocation of city resources on a variety of goals and recommendations included in previously completed city plans such as the Plan DSM -Comprehensive Land Use Plan, MoveDSM, LiveDSM, Urban Forest Master Plan, Capital Improvement Plan, and others. Additionally, Council members discussed the need for key performance indicators or metrics that can be used to track the status of the many projects that have been initiated by the city.

Operating Procedures and Customer Service

City Council members addressed the need to operate with a greater focus on priorities and an understanding of role clarity between policy makers and the administration. Specifically, members of the Council discussed the need for adherence to communication about issues and projects through the city manager or a department head. With respect to direct communication between a member of City Council and staff below the level of a director, Council members should not go to staff below the director level with questions, and preferably, all communication should be through the city manager.

In addition to role clarity, Council members expressed a desire for enhanced communication about internal operating procedures and with neighborhood groups. The Council discussed the need to clarify the process for meeting with neighborhood groups and residents about concerns related to the vacant building ordinance, the form-based code, and other regulations impacting community development. There was consensus among the Council that staff focus on finding creative ways/partnerships to “get to yes,” rather than reverting to a “no reply,” especially for redevelopment and business initiatives.

City Council Governance and Communication

Foundational to optimal governance by City Council members is a formal onboarding process that provides resources and information about operating procedures, established norms, and role clarity about the separate and distinct responsibilities of the elected body and the city manager and administrative leadership team. Specifically, Council members mentioned the need for:

- A process for onboarding new council members
- A better process for engaging neighborhood associations, residents, and members of the public
- Transparency about City services, operations, and programs to clarify city, county, state and other agency responsibilities
- Acknowledging and celebrating success
- A standard approach for dealing with neighborhood meetings and resulting handoffs



Prior to discussing priorities and goals for the next two years, the Mayor and City Council exchanged ideas about how they govern and communicate as a group. Although they did not come to consensus as to what is desired going forward, their comments are summarized below for further discussion and action.

What Council needs from staff:

- Clear information about issues and projects
- Clear recommendations and alternatives/options

What Council should give to staff:

- Respectful treatment and communication – It is a best practice for members of the Council to communicate with City staff in a respectful manner and tone. Members of the public will pattern their treatment and interactions with Des Moines city employees based on how the Council engages staff.
- A specified timeframe to address questions prior to Council meetings and work sessions -- Many city councils have established a timeframe (in days), before a city council meeting to contact staff with questions.
- Eliminate the practice of taking “pet projects” to staff – This practice often commits staff to a project or program “to-do” that has not been approved by a majority of the Council.

Next Steps

Four actions were identified by the Council members as next steps.

- a. Move forward with strategic planning after the November election. Strategic planning will provide a clear direction in the form of priorities and goals for the next two years.
- b. Identify current initiatives based on existing department work plans for discussion and Council member consensus before the November election.
- c. Priority initiatives identified by the Council should have accompanying success/key performance indicators that can be used to measure progress toward completion. The success measures should be a mix of workload, efficiency, and effectiveness measures, based on the project.
- d. Explore options to standardize the approach to neighborhood/community meetings and the way in which resident/community input is collected and used in decision-making.

