CLERK OF THE COUNCIL
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MEMORANDUM

TO: Whatcom County Council

FROM: Council Staff

RE: Advisory Group Survey Analysis

DATE: September 27, 2024

Background

On June 11, 2024, a survey was sent to all Whatcom County advisory group members (those appointed by both the Council and the Executive's Office) to better understand their groups' processes, challenges, and needed supports. This survey was open for 20 days and consisted of 23 multiple choice and short answer questions. When the survey closed on July 1, 114 individuals, representing 37 of the approximately 55 active county advisory groups, had answered at least one question.

This survey gathered information on advisory group members' experiences with application and meeting processes, Open Public Meetings Act (OPMA) requirements, and group outcomes, challenges, and opportunities. Please reference the Advisory Group Survey Response Analysis document below for a more comprehensive overview of survey results. Raw survey data is available upon request.

Summary of Responses

Most respondents heard about the opportunity to join their advisory group through someone they knew (friend, professional connection, employer, etc.), and 81.6% of respondents said their application process was good, with only three people reporting a poor experience. When asked if respondents had suggestions to improve the application process, prominent responses included increasing transparency, setting clear expectations around process and potential role, and advertising openings better. Throughout the survey, many respondents referenced a lack of clarity in their roles and responsibilities, OPMA procedures, how to work within a government setting, and how to acquire background information necessary to inform their work. To address this, several respondents suggested an onboarding program designed to teach skills necessary for a smooth transition into an advisory group member role.

When asked if their advisory group was achieving its purpose, 68.5% of respondents said "Yes," 22.5% said "Unsure," and 9% said "No." Those who said their advisory group was working to achieve its purpose cited thoughtful discussion, clear purpose, and tangible or measurable outcomes. Those who answered "Unsure" or "No" referenced unclear purpose, lack of tangible or measurable outcomes, their input not being requested or executed, and lack of funding and staff support.

In the OPMA part of the survey, 86.6% of respondents reported completing the Open Government Training, and 92% felt fully informed regarding OPMA requirements. Additionally, some commenters offered suggestions for ways the County could better provide support navigating OPMA requirements, including orientation training, question and answer sessions, printed rule cards, FAQs, and someone to call for consultation. Survey respondents were also asked to explain how OPMA affects their work as an advisory group member. This open-ended question received 45 responses that described OPMA's effect in a neutral way, 18 responses that described OPMA positively, and 18 responses that detailed some negative aspects of OPMA. Overall, while many respondents recognize the benefits of transparency and public involvement, several noted that OPMA requirements make it harder for groups to effectively communicate and get work done in a timely manner.

When survey respondents were asked to describe challenges their group faces, many respondents mentioned lack of funding and staff time, minimal County involvement and communication, unclear mission, and difficulty understanding and transitioning into their role. Respondents then identified ways that the County could provide support in addressing these challenges. Common themes included increased funding and staff support, better communication and guidance on the advisory group's mission, proactive recruiting, onboarding programing, and a change to quorum rules.

Whatcom County Advisory Group Survey Response Report

Survey Process and Purpose

In order to better understand the needs and inner workings of county advisory groups, staff sent a brief survey to all members on June 11, 2024. This survey was open for 20 days and consisted of 23 multiple choice and short answer questions. When the survey closed on July 1, 114 individuals, representing 37 of the approximately 55 active county advisory groups, had answered at least one question. The number of responses significantly varied by question, as did the number of respondents per group, which ranged from one to seven.

To see all responses, please reference the Advisory Group Survey Responses spreadsheet.

Applications and Onboarding

Most respondents (52.8%) heard about the opportunity to join a county advisory group through someone they know (friend, family, professional connection, employer, etc.). Another 22.2% learned of the opportunity through the county website, while the rest found out via Council announcement, social media, unofficial advisory group involvement, newspaper, or local organization.
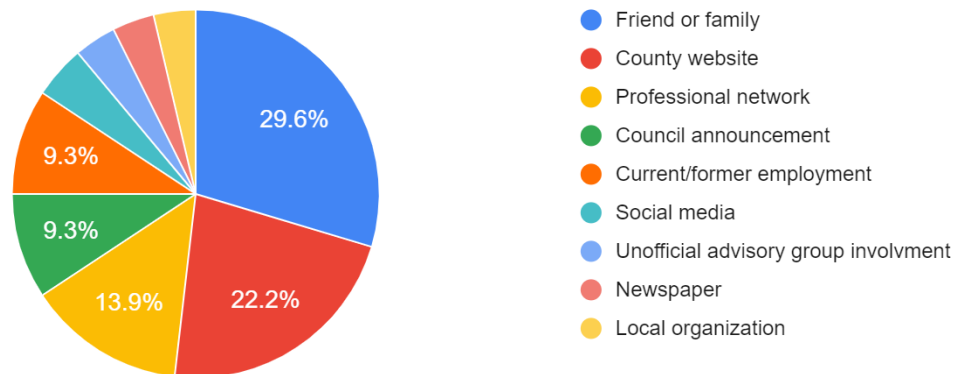

Figure 1: How did you hear about the county's advisory group opportunities?

A significant majority (82.3%) of respondents felt the application process was good, with only three individuals reporting a poor experience. Thirty-nine individuals offered suggestions to make the application and appointment process more smooth, transparent, or equitable.

For example, many commenters mentioned the need for clearer expectations around the application process. Respondents suggested greater transparency around the application and appointment timeline, how applications are reviewed and selected, who is involved in that process, how references and other aspects of the application are or are not considered, expectations for presenting to Council at the time of the appointment decision, and applicants' potential roles in the advisory group. Others suggested better publicization of openings through

a broader network (e.g. community foundations and boards, local colleges, libraries, newspaper announcements, etc.). One specific idea was to create a short video encouraging sign-ups and walking people through the application process. Several individuals also referenced increasing applicant diversity through strategies including advertising, outreach, recruitment, stipends, and additional language accommodations.

Additionally, the idea of developing onboarding programing was repeated throughout the survey. Many respondents referenced a lack of clarity in their roles and responsibilities, OPMA procedures, how to work within a government setting, and how to acquire background information necessary to inform their work. To address this, several respondents suggested an onboarding program. Some comments on this topic are included below.

> *"Please promote an on-boarding or mentorship program to help new members understand roles and expectations."*

> *"…It would also be helpful for new members to be given a "map" or overview of government and non-profit organizations which do similar or overlapping work."*

> *"…The only area I would say could use some improvement is setting expectations for new members. I asked questions about reviewing and providing input on the transportation plan, which was my first task before the first board meeting, but I still felt unclear about generally what was expected of us at the meeting. Perhaps an introductory packet would be helpful."*

> *"An on-boarding program plus easy access to the advisory committee's historic records of work product would help. After six months, I do not yet understand the context in which we are working."*

> *"…Some "laypeople" already feel like outsiders coming into those spaces and, though no one is responsible for everything those folks may or may not feel, an onboarding process could support the appointees in more swiftly locking into a rhythm with the seasoned members of the group and the mission of the committee…."*

Meeting Processes

The survey also asked a series of multiple-choice questions relating to group meeting processes. Most survey respondents (82.1%) reported that their group meets both in person and remotely, and 72.3% said that a county staff member hosts remote meetings while 15.8% said an advisory group member hosts meetings. Additionally, 91.1% use Zoom as their remote meeting platform, and 71.3% provide a physical location where members of the public can watch meetings live.

The following charts show the quantity and frequency of public attendance at advisory group meetings. Overall, there seems to be a variety of public participation with 70.1% of respondents

reporting that between one and five members of the public usually attend their advisory group meetings.
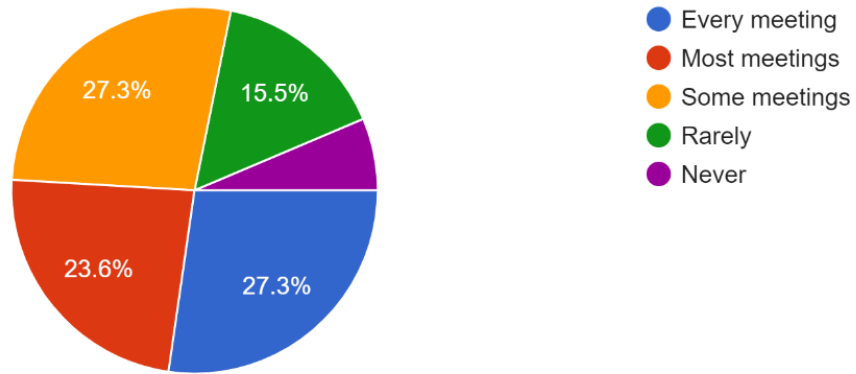

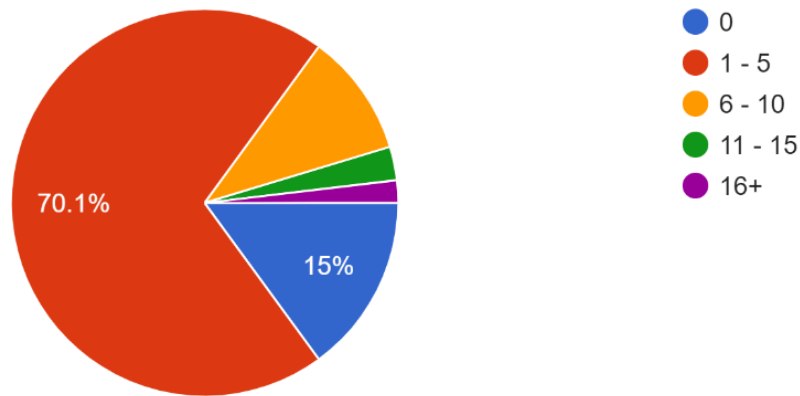*Figure 2: How often do members of the public attend your advisory group meetings?*

Figure 3: How many members of the public usually attend your advisory group meetings?

Outcomes

When asked if they felt that their advisory group was achieving its purpose, 68.5% of respondents said "Yes," 22.5% said "Unsure," and 9% said "No" (see figure 4). Those who said their advisory group was working to achieve its purpose cited thoughtful discussion, clear purpose, and tangible or measurable outcomes as their reasoning. Those who answered "Unsure" or "No" referenced unclear purpose, lack of tangible or measurable outcomes, their

input not being requested or executed, and lack of funding and staff support. Some specific comments are included below.

"There are many issues the advisory group is dealing with, with very little influence on many of them. Each issue is quite time consuming, but to make any kind of impact the board must cover as many of them as possible. The only way the board will be achieve its purpose will be from many cumulative and repetitive small influences…"

"We have been making tangible impacts on systems in our city and have seen tangible outcomes. With more stable funding it could be easier to move other projects ahead."

"Clear purpose, clear goals. Strong and consistent leadership. Productive meetings"

"I feel like the group is doing the work, but that it isn't translating into tangible achievements"

"It seems we that the County Council does not ask for input very often. The input that is given seems to not be very effective."

"At this point, I am unsure WHAT our purpose is. I think it is poorly communicated, almost never solicited by the council, and leaves input almost solely up to our Chair because he can attend council functions during the work day. I think there is a lot of potential going untapped in the group."

"Our task is bigger than our capacity. We need more financial and employee support."

"Active, involved, intelligent, diverse membership"
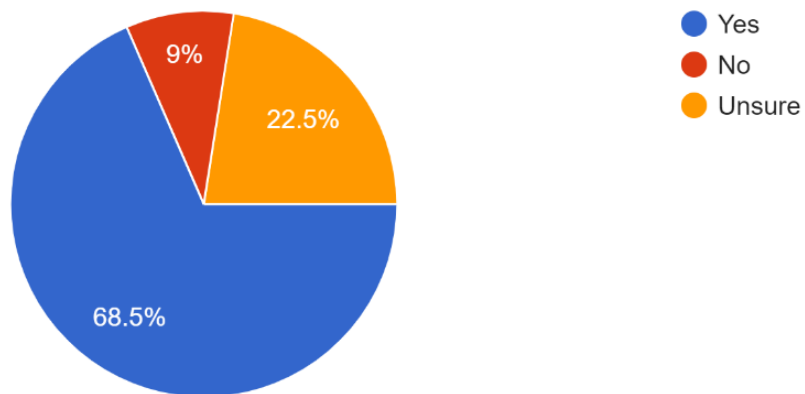

Yes
No
Unsure

9%
22.5%
68.5%

Figure 4: Do you feel your advisory group is working to achieve its purpose?

Open Public Meetings Act

Several survey questions focused on members' experience with Open Public Meetings Act (OPMA) requirements.

86.6% of respondents are confident they have completed the Open Government Training, and 92% feel fully informed regarding OPMA requirements. Thirteen respondents had specific questions about OPMA requirements, such as:

- When does private communication become a meeting?
- Can a committee chairperson email the group with a call for agenda items or send out draft minutes?
- Can we use Google Docs?
- Do we need to meet all OPMA requirements since it is not a decision-making body?

Respondents were also given the opportunity to offer suggestions for ways the County can better support advisory groups with navigating OPMA requirements. Of the 72 responses, 28 offered specific suggestions, and the remaining comments implied that current training is sufficient. Some common suggestions included orientation training, question and answer sessions, printed rule cards, FAQs, and someone to call for consultation. Below are some example comments:

> "Is there a messaging system or chat or other system that could be housed within government through which we could communicate with one another and comply with OPMA? Limiting our discussions to 90-minute meetings once per month slows down our work and impacts our effectiveness significantly."

> "I would love to have an attorney help our Board understand OPMA. I would also recommend that there is a written Q&A that is given out and discussed at orientation for new members"

> "We do not need additional help with OPMA. We need other resources such as additional funding and staff support."

> "I think County does a good job supporting our group and is willing to provide a great deal of training and expertise from a wide range of agencies."

Additionally, survey respondents were asked to explain how OPMA affects their work as an advisory group member. This open-ended question received 45 responses that described OPMA's effect in a neutral way, 18 responses that described OPMA positively, and 18 responses that detailed some negative aspects of OPMA. Overall, while many respondents recognize the benefits of transparency and public involvement, several noted that OPMA requirements make it harder for groups to effectively communicate and get work done in a timely manner. Some example comments are listed below.

Neutral Comment Examples:

- *"Does not affect it"*
- *"Affects the format of the meeting, for example meeting the quorum threshold and having public comment at each meeting"*
- *"We provide opportunities for the public to engage in our proceedings"*
- *"Some of the main effects as a group member pertain to the structures placed upon the meeting by the OPMA. I think often these structures work well and as intended. At times, however, I think they make discussion and decision making somewhat arduous for the group."*

Positive Comment Examples:

- *"As Chair, I strive to emphasize that our committee belongs to the public and that they have the right to observe our meetings and what we do and the right to address their government. I tend to grant them leeway when the want to speak to us. I would rather err on the side of the citizen."*
- *"It helps me remember the importance of transparency and inclusivity and provides a framework to ensure it."*
- *"It ensures that our work is inclusive, structured, has accountability, and is democratic (as in process, not as political affiliation)"*

Negative Comment Examples:

- *"It can be hard to speak freely in meetings, as there is always an awareness of everything being recorded. I appreciate the caution and reason why meetings are open to the public/recorded, but it has a noticeable effect how folks interact."*
- *"I can't email everyone at once and since everything is recorded, I sometimes feel that I can't speak my mind as the only female on the committee (and of color)"*
- *"I appreciate the need for transparency, but it makes it difficult to accomplish our work. Since we cannot communicate in many forms outside of meetings, any decisions that take the whole group slow down to what can be accomplished in one 90-minute meeting a month. We are finding ways to decentralize our decision-making and work with sub-committees but our work would happen much faster if there was an avenue for us to communicate/collaborate asynchronously between monthly meetings."*
- *"I don't feel like I can meet one-on-one with other members, council or staff without breaking some rule that isn't clearly defined. I have tried to direct written correspondence to the group but it is held up by leadership because I am not allowed to send directly to the group since this may violate OPMA. Most of my efforts go nowhere and it is discouraging to put time and thought into something only to be ignored."*

Challenges and Opportunities

Respondents were asked to describe a challenge their advisory group faced or currently faces. Comments significantly varied as many respondents described specific experiences; however, common challenges included lack of funding, staff time, County involvement, communication, clear mission, and an on-boarding program. Some example comments describing challenges are below.

> *"The change you made to the definition of quorum has been a problem for us. We have 30 seats, but several of them have rarely if ever been filled (example: DCYF representative, Lummi Nation representative). But our quorum is fixed at 16, rather than a majority of seated members which would be a lower number."*

> *"We get a lot of information from a lot of different sources at a lot of different times, and are then required to collaborate on. Most functional groups that I'm aware of, such as office groups, have a single repository by which their members can access and share information. If advisory boards are to be most effective, I think it would be helpful to have a single portal through which information can be distributed, stored, managed and accessed."*

> *"I think that the framework of the standard agenda is a problem. I would welcome the opportunity to explain where the problem lies... This is Holly O'Neil (professional facilitator) 360-303-3217"*

> *"…It typically takes pressure and repeat/parallel messaging from these other groups before a policy recommendation from the B&C committee is codified into an actual ordinance or procedural change within county government. While this is lag is understandable, the lack of clarity around the timing / substance / format of the 'required follow up' can make the it difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the advisory committee."*

> *"The group is too homogeneous. Only one woman now (more in the past) only two people of color, and one not from an underrepresented group. Most members are academics or professionals--we could use a contractor, a farmer, an employee of an energy company, etc. We have tried to encourage people from other constituencies to apply, with only slight success."*

> *"There is very little staff support provided. Staff are stretched thin between many different committees. Requests (even simple ones, like getting a link to materials presented in a regular meeting posted to our website, or help with data entry), are often denied or delayed due to lack of staff time."*

> *"A challenge has been to understand the expectations of the advisory board and how to solicit meaningful input and feedback from all members of the group. There are many different groups working on various problems being faced by our community, which makes the work more difficult if those complexities aren't clearly mapped. For members not*

working daily in government or the non-profit sector, it's difficult to see how these pieces fit."

Advisory group members were then asked to identify ways that the County can provide support to address these barriers/challenges. Sixty-one comments suggested ideas for additional support, with common themes including increased funding, staff time, communication, guidance on advisory group mission, proactive recruiting, onboarding programing, and a change of quorum rules. Some example comments are below.

"Increased dedicated staff time! We could use someone who can help guide and implement changes proposed (as applicable) and who has more time to invest in the process."

"It's always nice to have a response from the Council or Exec when we send in a memo, sometimes it's met with silence and I have to reach out to arrange a follow-up meeting."

"Alter the default quorum requirement to be a majority of seated members so that vacant seats don't count against the quorum requirement."

"Public awareness to broaden participation and inclusion, too many experts"

"Create a single portal for each advisory board"

"Honest and straightforward communication is always helpful."

"Provide more guidance on mission."

"We have excellent staff. We need specific project management staff and a communications budget so taxpayers and voters know what we and the County are up to. The County is playing a very dangerous game at the moment. Without appropriate strategic communications by the County, taxpayers and voters cannot possibly understand the good work the County is accomplishing. The communications need to be in language, compelling visuals, and in context that citizens with only five minutes of focus can understand and relate to. Leadership should be very concerned about the obvious outcomes of a lack of strategic communications. We're already seeing them."

Lastly, advisory group members were given the option to share any additional comments. Fifty people wrote specific comments, the contents of which largely varied. Some examples are included below. (Please see the Advisory Group Survey Responses spreadsheet for a complete list.)

"The county staff we work with is great. They seem to understand our concerns and try to address the issues…"

"Thank you for providing a way for me to be a part of the commission. Having ZOOM meeting available when I cannot come in person, makes me and my time feel valued."

"Probably the most difficult thing to do as a member is to access minutes between meetings, and to know who in the county I can access about various elements of a project…"

"I've been on the committee for nearly 8 years and, while I am appreciative to have learned more about the workings of the county, overall it has been a disappointing experience. This is mostly due to the glacial pace of the progress on projects."

"I wish I wasn't the only female of color"

"Lack of transparency from County agencies has hindered our work"

"It would also be helpful if the county could provide stipends for participation in such advisory committees. Stipends help make participation more possible for those whose jobs do not fund their participation. This removes a barrier for people with lived experiences in our impact areas to participate, and creates more meaningful strategy and actions."

"Often seems like we are meeting because we are supposed to, not because there is actually anything meaningful for us to provide advice on."

"Please try to survey past board members who recently stepped down...There is a "good ole boy" feeling to the meetings and I am not sure that members and the general public are respected and valued unless their opinions are in line with the majority…"

Survey Questions

1: Which advisory group(s) do you serve on? (111 responses)

2. How long have you served on this advisory group? (113 responses)

3. How did you hear about the county's advisory group opportunities? (108 responses)

4. Have you previously served on any other advisory groups? If so which ones? (106 responses)

5. How was your experience with processing your advisory group application? (e.g. applying online, receiving information about your application, etc.) (113 responses)

6. What suggestions do you have to make the application and appointment process more smooth, transparent, or equitable? (81 responses)

7. How does your advisory group engage with and provide input to County Council and/or the County Executive? (106 responses)

8. Do you feel your advisory group is working to achieve its purpose? (111 responses)

9. Please explain your response above. (99 responses)

10. Have you completed the Open Government Training (www.whatcomcounty.us/1623/Open-Government-Training) including updating your training every four years? (112 responses)

11. Do you feel fully informed about Open Public Meetings Act (OPMA) requirements for your advisory group? (112 responses)

12. What questions do you have about how OPMA applies to your advisory group? (81 responses)

13. How does OPMA affect your work as an advisory group member? Please explain. (81 responses)

14. How can the county support your advisory group with OPMA (additional training, Q&A with experts, something else)? (70 responses)

15. Where does your advisory group meet? (112 responses)

16. If remotely, on what platform do you meet? (101 responses)

17. If remotely, who hosts the meeting? (101 responses)

18. If you meet remotely, does your advisory group also provide a physical location where members of the public can watch the meeting live? (101 responses)

19. How often do members of the public attend your advisory group meetings? (110 responses)

20. How many members of the public usually attend your advisory group meetings? (107 responses)

21. Please describe any barriers or challenges your advisory group experiences or has experienced in doing their work. (85 responses)

22. In what ways can the county best provide support to address these barriers or challenges? (78 responses)

23. Are there any other comments you would like to share about your experience as an advisory group member? (70 responses)