

Dialogue Boulder Recommendations to the City Manager and City Council - December 2021

Dialogue Boulder is pleased to submit recommendations to Boulder City Manager Rivera-Vandermyde and the Boulder City Council that are the result of ten months of careful consideration by a group of local residents with diverse policy positions.

All of the recommendations relate to the focus areas of Boards and Commissions and Public Engagement. They are intended to enhance the effectiveness, efficiency and inclusiveness of city processes for the benefit of Council, staff, boards and commissions, and the entire Boulder community.

Dialogue Boulder would like to mention to Council and the City Manager that we realize that some of these changes will necessitate additional expenditures, including staff time and equipment. We support the City Manager and her staff in analyzing their needs to accommodate these changes and in any requests she may make for additional funding.

Approving recommendations a few at a time over several years, while of some benefit, may diminish overall impact and effectiveness. Dialogue Boulder strongly believes that all of these recommendations, approved now, will create the most positive change. While Dialogue Boulder appreciates the time that this will take initially, implementation of all of the recommendations would prevent revisiting these needs continuously year after year and the benefits of approving all of the recommendations at once would be worthwhile. However, Dialogue Boulder has prioritized recommendations.

Key: May be designated at the end of each recommendation:

PRIORITY - Considered as crucial by Dialogue Boulder. There are eleven such priorities. Two of them already are supported by staff and don't require a Council vote.

C - Specifically encouraged by at least one Council member (past or current)

B/C - Specifically encouraged by at least two board or commission members

Recommendations at the end of each section after the yellow highlight already have staff support and do not require Council approval; in addition, Dialogue Boulder hopes the Council will support them.

Public Engagement Recommendations

Problem Statement: The public, Council members, city staff, board and commission members agree that public engagement needs to be improved. Council members face overwhelming workloads. Staff often feels overworked and overly criticized. Many board and commission members feel unheard and not well-utilized. The public often feels mistrustful of the entire decision-making process. Council is not receiving valuable community input early enough in the process. The benefits of better outcomes as the result of a more collaborative process are clear.

1. For any item that involves a major Council decision, staff will provide research to the appropriate board or commission and to the public before the relevant board or commission public hearing. Boards and commissions will gather and accurately report public feedback, as well as their own conclusions, in a timely manner before staff makes recommendations to Council. Therefore, Council will be able to digest all information, including public input, board or commission input, and staff input at the same time. **PRIORITY, C, B/C**

Why? This recommendation creates the template for an improved process. To put another way, Council will request input on a topic; staff will conduct the research and make public the results. The appropriate boards or commissions will hold public hearings and make their own recommendations, conveying public input in their report. Then, staff will make their recommendations and all information from staff, boards and commissions, and the public will be received by Council at the same time. The public will feel heard. Council will have the board/commission and the public's valuable input earlier in the process. Staff will have the opportunity to receive public input before they make recommendations, so they will encounter a more satisfied public and be able to utilize that input into their own recommendation process. Everybody benefits. Council will have the benefit of a full range of views. Time will be better spent.

2. Boards and commissions will be encouraged to pilot new methods of public participation such as facilitated deliberative processes, civil discourse, invited input, online discussions, charrettes, circle talks, and other approaches. **PRIORITY, C, B/C**

Why? This will provide exploration of options for methods that may enhance city/public discourse and may lend itself to an improved exchange of ideas. New methods that prove to be successful can be expanded. Efforts of boards/commissions will take some of the workload from Council and promote better public trust in city processes with public input early enough in the process to be fully considered. Well-considered innovative methods should be part of Boulder's ability to provide leadership models for other locales. City communications staff already has the expertise to share these methods.

3. Potential hardships and obstacles prevent diverse groups from participation in board and commission membership and in public hearings. A process to identify the potential barriers and possible solutions to mitigate them, including childcare, meeting times, virtual meeting options, etc., will be explored. **PRIORITY, C, B/C**

Why? Diversity is a City goal. Specific steps must be taken to achieve better diversity. This recommendation reflects the commitment to diversity.

4. Staff is tasked with much of the communication to the public on behalf of all aspects of city governance, including Council, staff, boards and commissions. These tasks differ from efforts to gather input from the public. When issues that have not yet been decided upon by Council are introduced to the public, they should be constructed and presented neutrally. Staff may often be tasked with communications to build support for or ease change but, for major projects that have not yet been approved by Council, such persuasive messaging and the gathering of public input will be kept in separate channels. **PRIORITY, C, B/C**

Why? For the public to have trust in City government, there needs to be a firewall between City messaging and City efforts to gather public input. While both functions are within the purview of the communications department, the actual staff members providing messaging should not be the same staff members that provide outreach for public input. No staff member should ever be put in the uncomfortable position of having to both provide their department's position on a project at the same time that they are tasked with collecting public input. Implementing this recommendation would go a long way towards rebuilding trust with the community with real public engagement.

5. Council will strive for consensus by offering opportunities for public dialogue with representatives of competing interests where appropriate. **PRIORITY, B/C**

Why? A big shift needs to occur to find common ground among opposing groups of residents. It is of

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direct benefit to City Council if opposing community groups can find common ground at the outset of a project. Cooperation among groups of residents will save time and aggravation for everyone. Spearheading creative methods of bringing opposing residents together has the promise of leading to more comity, a smoother process, and better outcomes. The city already has the expertise within the communications department to pilot these efforts.

6. Individual City Council members are encouraged to make themselves available to the public and to establish regular public engagement opportunities that employ a variety of different outreach strategies, including consideration of office hours. **C, B/C**

Why? One way to promote diversity is for Council members to make themselves available to members of the public who cannot attend meetings. Outreach into the community promotes diversity by going to where people live. Office hours allow for one-on-one discussions that provide members of the public a safe, private space.

7. In the development process that commences with an application to the Planning Department and includes a concept review, the public shall be brought into the development review process even earlier than the current practice. Staff shall facilitate public input and suggestions even prior to the concept review hearing. **B/C**

Why? This allows for a more realistic approach to public engagement by bringing in the public earlier in the process in important planning matters. It provides a key opportunity for public engagement being more meaningful, useful and trusted.

8. Early in the process, fact-finding on major issues, modeled after the neutral “Blue Book” process of the election commission, will be provided in an easily accessible manner well before public hearings. **B/C**

Why? Just as Election Guides can present both sides of an issue, presenting both sides of any issue helps build trust and helps the public better understand the issues. The city gains credibility for presenting various sides of important issues.

The following is a Recommendation that staff has indicated they can undertake without requiring Council action; in addition, Dialogue Boulder still would like City Council and the City Manager to support.

- A new public process advisory group will be created, its status as a committee, board, commission (or other) to be decided depending upon the dictates of its final design. Members of this group would include residents with diverse policy opinions, past members of boards or commissions, and residents who have not often participated in local issues. The public process advisory group would provide input on a variety of public engagement issues that may include:
 - a) the design of city surveys;
 - b) the design of the public process in advance of each major decision (at the discretion of the committee);
 - c) the structure of public conversations and ways in which the city receives/communicates public input;
 - d) equity concepts and methods for reaching underserved communities;
 - e) new ways of reaching common ground among diverse groups (including staff); and
 - f) other issues as they arise. **PRIORITY, C, B/C**

Why? This ensures an ongoing, productive and creative approach to oversight of public engagement issues. Dialogue Boulder looks forward to learning about staff plans for a public process advisory group.

BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS – STAFF AND COUNCIL INTERACTIONS - RECOMMENDATIONS

Problem Statement: Council members recognize that everyone benefits from better utilization of boards and commissions – staff, board and commission members, Council and the public. The problem is how to effectively accomplish this better utilization of boards and commissions.

9. Council and the City Manager will provide increased attention and response to board or commission priorities as cited in annual letters (which are each board’s or commission’s current best option for communicating with Council), along with the introduction of new methods for better utilizing boards and commissions. **PRIORITY, B/C, C**

Why? More engagement between boards and commissions and Council and the City Manager creates better lines of communication that leads to more efficiency, effectiveness and inclusivity. Many board and commission members have creative ideas that could be utilized to promote better outcomes for all.

10. Research presented to Council by staff, including research conducted internally or citing other sources in literature reviews, will be based on commonly accepted relevant best research practices and will present all sides of relevant issues. **PRIORITY, B/C**

Why? Currently some board and commission members and many members of the public have concerns about research results presented by individual departments. Some of these concerns include that the policy implications of the research are not clear; others address whether the results actually represent the community under study, and still others question the validity and objectivity of the methods and results—especially when the “results” presented are constituted of raw, or unanalyzed data or information that is not aggregated. Approval of this recommendation will eliminate any possible “push poll”_surveys, cherry-picking of information, and omissions and misrepresentation in the presentation of the research results. Improving the quality of data gathering and research results will save money and improve program quality, because decisions based on lack of evidence or poor evidence are likely to result in ineffective programs. If the public comes to trust the research more fully, everyone (Council, staff, boards and commissions, and the community) is likely to benefit.

11. When a Council study session involves a topic relevant to particular boards or commissions, those boards or commissions will be invited in a timely manner to have one or two representatives (of the board or commission’s own choosing) present information and answer questions at the same study session. **B/C, C**

Why? This provides Council with an opportunity to understand board and commission decisions and to receive feedback about public input. It saves Council and staff members time in that the public is more satisfied and feels “heard”. Board and commission members are valued for their hard work.

12. Designated staff with expertise in public engagement will work with boards or commissions and their staff liaisons to implement a balance between professionally designed protocols and innovation in public engagement. These staff members will work on many issues with the new public process advisory group. **B/C, C**

Why? Department staff members already are overworked. Designated staff with public

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engagement experience can provide a balance of consistency and innovation that builds upon the strengths of boards and commissions. Overall, this enhances morale and effective communications that provides for more satisfaction and better outcomes.

13. When a report is issued by a board or commission (including joint boards or commissions or their subcommittees) that differs significantly from staff recommendations, that report and its presentation will receive equal attention and time from Council at the request of that entity. **B/C**

Why? Allowing boards and commissions equal time with staff when their conclusion on a particular Council matter varies from staff is a benefit to everyone. Council gets to hear diverse perspectives from a board or commission that has studied the issue carefully and listened to public input. Council has a clearer view of various sides of an issue which is good for the overall decision-making process. Staff can seize a new opportunity for interacting with board and commission members. This recommendation provides a method of allowing Council to hear all sides of an issue in a reasonable manner. While this may occur only rarely when other recommendations are in place, it is a valuable means of enhancing public engagement and utilizing boards and commissions.

14. A process will be established to address situations in which members of boards or commissions, staff or the public disagree about the accuracy of the information presented in formal records, while also protecting this process from abuse. **B/C**

Why? This provides for the development of a plan on those rare occasions when a stakeholder feels that information formally presented to Council is inaccurate. It goes a long way toward enhancing public trust in the process.

15. Council's webpage will contain notification to the public that boards or commissions will be a forum for public discussion before staff makes recommendations to Council. The Council webpage will contain a link to all upcoming board or commission public hearings, as well as a link to board or commission recruitment in an effort to increase public engagement. **B/C**

Why? This is one way of providing more outreach to the public, taking the load off of Council, better utilizing boards and commissions, and providing staff with an early opportunity to hear from the public. The greatest benefit is the ease with which the public will be able to obtain information.

16. Council, staff, and boards or commissions will work collaboratively to determine the level and type of staff support that is needed for each board or commission to be effective, including when or how boards or commissions may request additional assistance or research from staff. **B/C, C**

Why? This recommendation does not impact the public directly, but there is an indirect impact in the effectiveness of boards and commissions that creates clarity for staff members who work with board and commissions, as well as board and commission members. Currently, there is some disparity among boards and commissions for staff support. This should bring more efficiency and effectiveness to the process.

For the next three recommendations, staff has indicated they can undertake them without requiring Council action; in addition, Dialogue Boulder still would like the City Council members and City Manager to support them.

- Since staff packets and memos to council are a key conduit between boards or commissions and Council, all such packets and memos will comprehensively reflect input from boards or commissions, as well as the public input provided at board or commission meetings. **PRIORITY, B/C, C**

Why? This provides a specific method for instituting better engagement, more diversity, and better utilization of boards and commissions.

- When conducting research in their own respective fields, staff will consider “emerging practices” as well as “best practices” in order to provide fresh ideas of some merit so that Boulder can remain innovative. **B/C**

Why? As the City seeks solutions to local issues, following well-documented best practices is important. However, without occasionally piloting an effort that is “promising” or “emerging”, Boulder will lose an innovative edge and, more importantly, miss out on the consideration of great solutions.

- Council Agenda Committee (C.A.C.) will invite all board or commission members to observe the annual retreat and will invite all appropriate board or commissions to observe Council meetings that are relevant to the topic areas under their purview. Similarly, boards and commissions will invite Council members to relevant meetings. **B/C, C**

Why? Enhanced lines of communication benefits everyone. Board and commission members will feel more valued. Board and commission members will be provided with an opportunity to learn more about Council’s perspective on a topic related to their board or commission, and vice-versa.

BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS – RECRUITMENT, TRAINING, ORIENTATION, AND OPERATIONS - RECOMMENDATIONS

Problem statement: There are changes to board and commission policies that are internal and do not directly pertain to Council, yet their implementation is key. Currently, boards and commissions could operate more effectively and efficiently, as well as lend themselves to more diversity, if specific changes were implemented.

17. There shall be a standing committee of current and past board or commission members with diverse opinions to work directly with two (2) Council members twice a year to suggest ongoing and periodic specific enhancements to policies and procedures for boards or commissions and to address board or commission issues that may arise. **PRIORITY, C, B/C**

Why? This provides a process for ongoing efforts to enhance and maintain lines of communication between Council and boards and commissions, as well as to continuously improve processes. It is a key recommendation to continue process enhancement.

18. Minutes and all votes, feedback, and recommendations from boards or commissions to Council will reflect minority points of view when votes are not unanimous. Input provided at public hearings will be reflected in a balanced manner. A method to ensure accuracy will be determined by each board or commission with publicly accessible, archived recordings as a preference. **PRIORITY, C, B/C**

Why? This recommendation is important for enhancing diversity in many ways. City Manager Nuria Rivera-Vandermyde mentioned that this recommendation could have the additional value of saving time for staff. Staff would not have to gather the information anew but could copy relevant portions of minutes to include in Council packets. This recommendation also enhances public trust in the process, as it provides an additional means of easily accessing detailed information about board and commission meetings.

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19. Each year, Council should determine plans to engage individual boards and commissions and set priorities, including a defined set of expectations and deliverables. C, B/C

Why? This recommendation would save everyone time and energy to have Council and board and commission members all on the same page. It should take into consideration the ordinances that define each board and commission and provide guidelines of what Council and staff need, as well as allowing for boards and commissions to be innovative.

20. Before recruitment begins each year, Council will seek advice from boards and commissions about what expertise and perspectives are useful to achieve the desired diversity. C, B/C

Why? Board and commission members may have valuable input on what particular expertise and perspectives will enhance their board or commission's capacity for increased diversity.

21. Orientation will include more than general city policies, adding aspects such as: the importance of understanding the particular ordinance establishing each board or commission; the specifics of each board or commission's bylaws relevant to the new member; and the importance of the careful review of minutes, agenda packets and other information. Members will be informed of their board or commission's role in the overall decision-making process. B/C

Why? Although this particular recommendation does not impact Council directly, it is of great interest to board and commission members who want to know more about these aspects at the outset, as well as receiving orientation about city regulations. Expectations of board and commission members will be more clear. This information is expected to better equip board and commission members to fulfill their responsibilities in a way that is of increased benefit to all.

22. Every five years, there shall be a committee consisting of members of the public, past or present board or commission members and staff to review board and commission practices and procedures, as well as review sunset provisions and new needs. Board and commission procedures from other cities and other sources of guidance will be reviewed in consideration of possible recommendations to Council. B/C

Why? It is important to take an occasional long look at boards and commissions. Some new procedures may be employed in other locales that would be worth consideration. Some boards and commissions may have already fulfilled their purpose. A need for a new board or commission might arise.

23. Members from boards or commissions are encouraged to attend occasional relevant meetings of other boards or commissions. C, B/C

Why? It makes sense for board and commission members to know more about other boards and commissions, especially those that review particular topics that are relevant. Coordination and communication about the agendas of boards and commissions should be simple to institute.

24. Meeting minutes will follow a model and be complete as useful records of deliberations, decisions, action items and communications; board and commission members and staff will receive training to this end. C, B/C

Why? First, this provides an easy means of the public accessing information that is actually useful to them. Second, it provides consistency. Finally, it provides for easy review of board and commission meetings by Council, staff or other board and commission members. This recommendation is important for

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enhancing diversity in many ways. In conjunction with Recommendation #18, it is valuable to saving time for staff members. Staff would not have to gather the information anew but could copy relevant portions of minutes to include in Council packets. This recommendation also enhances public trust in the process.

25. The agenda for each board or commission meeting will be set by that board or commission, incorporating staff needs and Council matters. **B/C**

Why? Dialogue Boulder has ascertained that agenda-setting varies greatly. In some boards and commissions, the agenda is set by the members without staff input – even when staff needs to have items discussed because of their job responsibilities. Other boards and commissions have agendas that are created by staff without member input. This recommendation provides for the best of all possible policies on a consistent basis – that the agenda is set by the board and commission members and that staff needs and Council matters will be included in that agenda.

26. All board or commission meetings will be recorded with audio and video; minutes will include timestamps for each item discussed. The city should implement this current vital technology as swiftly as possible to allow both in-person and remote participation in meetings. **C, B/C**

Why? With such technology now available, the City will want to enhance public engagement by making available audio and video for all board and commission meetings. This will enhance public engagement, as it will be easy to access meetings. It will also provide a permanent way to review past meetings for clarification.

For the following three recommendations, staff has indicated they can undertake implementing them without Council action; in addition, Dialogue Boulder would like Council to support them.

- Although the appointment of new board and commission members will continue to be held each spring, the City of Boulder will provide increased year-long board and commission information on recruitment to the public, including outreach to diverse communities. **B/C**

Why? Public participation in board and commissions will be enhanced if information is available all year long, including outreach to diverse communities.

- The recruitment, application, training and orientation process will clarify the specific tasks, responsibilities and time commitments of each board or commission more fully and will include a pre-application session for all interested residents. **C, B/C**

Why? Many newly appointed board and commission members don't have a clear idea of what the appointment entails. A pre-application session will clarify the time-commitments and responsibilities. This overall recommendation will provide for more consistency in board and commission members. Additional information to new members will further benefit the individuals and the overall effectiveness of boards and commissions.

- Boards and commissions that have funding (whether provided through board/commission administrative budgets or directly by the corresponding department) may allocate some of those funds for research within their subject area to consider emerging or best practices. **B/C**

Why? Boards and commissions may provide a benefit accessing relevant specific research on occasion for areas within their purview. This will allow them to do so and contribute to Boulder's

commitment to increased utilization of boards and commissions. Currently, these requests generally are not allotted in budgets.

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS MADE BY COUNCIL, STAFF, AND BOARD AND COMMISSION MEMBERS

Dialogue Boulder made every effort to accurately present all suggestions from Council, staff, and members of boards and commissions that Dialogue Boulder considers to be viable.

Dialogue Boulder will continue to provide outreach to the public and will provide a brief report before the January Council retreat.

While Dialogue Boulder did not have the time to discuss the following external suggestions in detail as had been done with all Dialogue Boulder recommendations, there is general Dialogue Boulder agreement that these suggestions have merit and align with Dialogue Boulder's own recommendations.

Here are their additional suggestions that Dialogue Boulder endorses:

- The City should create an outreach plan to local nonprofits and community leaders of diverse groups to get their input on a consistent basis.
- Council members each could serve as (rotating) resources to boards and commissions as the "point" person on Council.
- The City should fund boards and commissions to conduct focus groups on related topics.
- There should be more clarification regarding responsibilities for board chairs, as well as potential increases in their responsibilities – which also could relieve staff of some burdens.
- Budget information about boards and commissions should be transparent and easily accessible.
- A staff person should be designated as the overall liaison to work with board and commission members and staff.
- A "data steward" staff member should be assigned to establish consistent best practices and to review all research from all departments before submission to Council.

Respectfully submitted by:

Dialogue Boulder

Steering committee: Jan Burton, Peter Mayer, Judy Nogg

Participating members – Bruce Borowsky, Stan Deetz, John Gerstle, Karen Hollweg, Margaret LeCompte, Kurt Nordback, Lisa Spalding, David Takahashi, Bill Sweeney, John Tayer

Contributing Members (1-3 meetings) – Bryan Bowen, Jacques Juilland, Jen Livovich, Nikhil Mankekar

The Dialogue Boulder Overview is attached to the submission to Council and the City Manager as a separate document.

For questions, comments or additional information, please contact dialogueboulder@gmail.com.