

Mayor David Narkewicz,

The Charter Review Committee appreciates the support of you and your staff during our work this year. The committee's report, which will be filed with the city clerk by Dec. 31, will include an executive summary of our major recommendations, as well as an annotated version of the city charter detailing all proposed changes.

During the course of our work, we deliberated on numerous matters brought to us by members of the community. Matters coming before us that were not specifically germane to the charter are not addressed in the executive summary and of course, do not appear in the annotated charter. We take the opportunity with this letter to describe one such matter and to offer several recommendations for your consideration.

Throughout its deliberations, the committee heard various concerns related to what might best be described as "access to information." We do not interpret the testimony received in this regard to be pleas for greater transparency, per se. There is a general consensus that the city meets all statutory obligations regarding dissemination of financial information. The concerns we heard deal more with availability of information to the public, particularly those residents without access to computers and online capabilities; the ability of information to present accurate "activity" data describing performance goals and accomplishments for departments; and the timeliness of some of the available information if it is to be used by officials for decision-making.

The committee consistently asked those giving testimony to be specific about the information they are seeking. In virtually all cases, the information or data sought is available somewhere, in some fashion. Nevertheless, the committee heard a desire for a one-stop source for readily accessible data and information on departmental accomplishments, which are sometimes available on non-city-maintained websites, such as police crime reports contained in Federal Crime Statistics. Similarly, school department data is generally available on the state's Department of Education website.

Again, the committee found that requests for information can usually be met using online searches, if the searcher has the aptitude and access. Some residents are frustrated that the city, which they believe has an obligation to provide data to citizens upon request, does not make it more easily accessible. The city's website is not seen by some to be an accessible portal for information searches, and perhaps should be reviewed to determine whether the navigation can be made clearer. The committee recognizes that these frustrations may not be broadly shared by many residents, but because several people, including former and current city councilors, shared similar concerns, we offer the following recommendations, which we hope may improve accessibility to information.

Enhance the budget document with statistics on departmental accomplishments during the prior fiscal year and goals for the current year. The committee did not recommend any changes to Section 7-3 (Submission of Operating Budget; Budget Message). We recognize the overall quality of the budget document and appreciate the role it plays in contributing to the AAA rating the city earns for its fiscal management. We recognize the effort the mayor and fiscal staff expend on crafting a comprehensive budget message including financial planning guidelines and presenting it to the public during community forums. We note that the section requires that “The budget message submitted by the mayor shall explain the operating budget in fiscal terms and in terms of work programs for all city agencies ... The proposed operating budget shall provide a complete fiscal plan of all city funds and activities and shall be in the form the mayor deems desirable.” We believe that the “activities” portion of the budget might be enhanced and an expanded section detailing departmental productivity metrics and goals would be helpful as a single source of desired information.

Create an Information Nexus on the city website. The committee believes that answers to many of the data-specific questions raised by residents during our meetings are available through an online inquiry. However, some believe it is difficult to find that information on the city's website. We believe that the city, in reviewing its website, consider more descriptive headings for drop-down menus, and clearer navigation to reports by department heads and vital statistics. Reference sources could include municipal budget documents; the annual audit (the CAFR, which provides 10-year expenditure information); the city’s “Open Checkbook”; Department of Public Works productivity documents; and links to sites where city agencies provide statistical reports, such as the federal crime database and the state Department of Education information centers.

Consider “Know Your City” workshops. The committee suggests that workshops where city officials inform residents about programs, goals and accomplishments might be an important opportunity to give them the tools and skills required to access and interpret financial documents and productivity reports, thereby minimizing direct inquiries made to the mayor’s office, individual councilors and department heads. Recognizing that this election cycle will result in a fairly dramatic turnover in the City Council, the committee suggests that offering such a workshop for councilors and residents early in the new council term might be valuable.

Members of the Charter Review Committee welcome the opportunity to discuss these recommendations at your convenience.